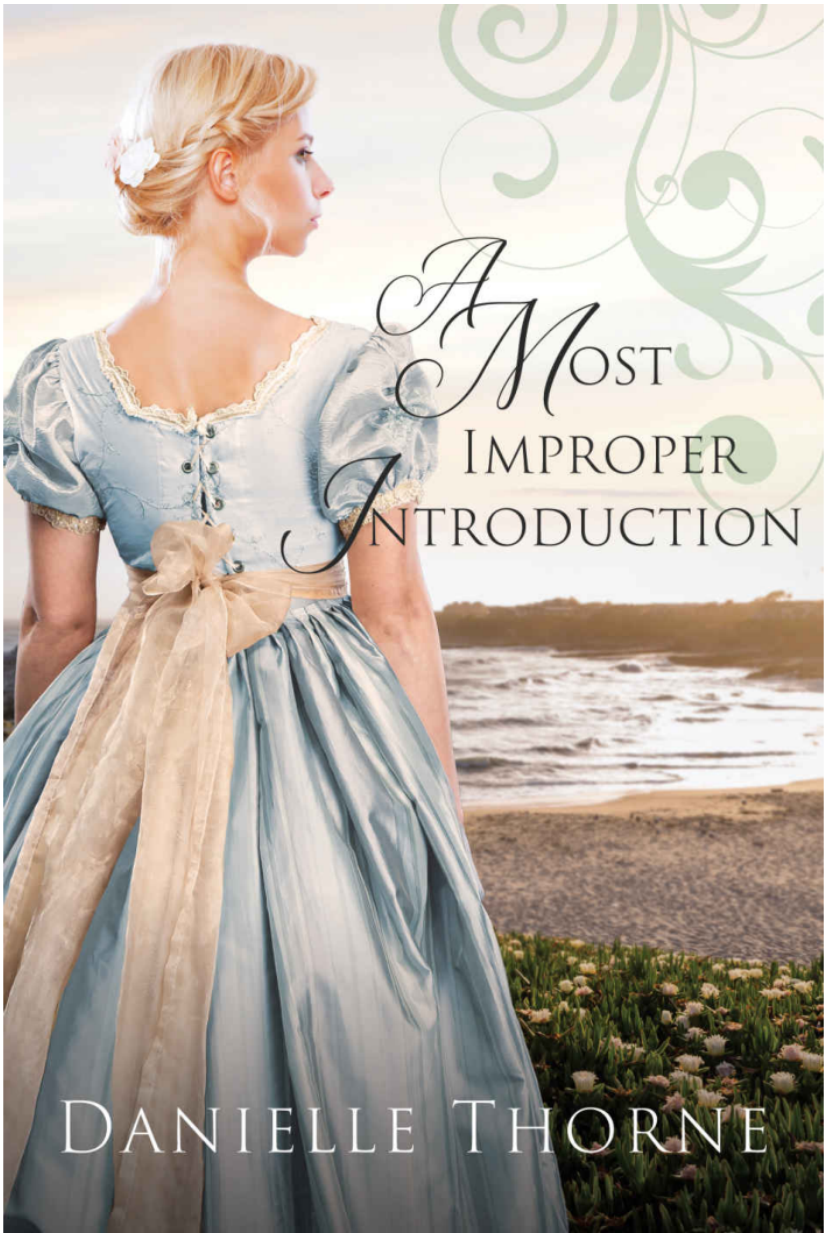

A Most Improper Introduction
Danielle Thorne

A MOST IMPROPER INTRODUCTION

by

Danielle Thorne

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A Most Improper Introduction



Chapter One



Felicity Barrow should have blamed her eldest brother the moment she saw the black flag flapping on the horizon, but she condemned Femy instead. After all, her headstrong sister was the reason she was captive on the endless blue sea. Edward, or Lord Barrow, as he insisted his six younger siblings call him, had no choice but to send Felicity away because Femy's tricks had ruined any chance of her making a proper match. And now?

Pirates! Why couldn't it have been a storm or the plague? Felicity slumped until a burst of laughter jerked her from her exhausted stupor at the mast. Remembering where she stood made her blood run cold. Another Barrow would be shamed before the world. No gentleman would ever want to marry a woman kidnapped by pirates.

A few lurid guffaws made Felicity shudder. The *Anguille,* or the *Eel*, was a ship as slimy as its namesake. She lowered her eyes to avoid any attention while the corsairs rummaged through trunks they'd stolen from her ship. Her family had dropped her aboard the merchantman with no servants or chaperones other than the Packwoods—a clergyman and his wife. It was hardly proper for a Barrow. Had Femy lowered expectations for them all? Good heavens! What the twins would get away with now and monstrous little Genevieve, too.

Felicity stared at the tarred boards beneath her feet. The pirates had spared no gunpowder frightening the West Indiaman vessel into surrender. They'd bandied the British sailors about, emptied their stores, and bound Felicity's arms behind her back. When Mrs. Packwood pleaded for her charge's safety, the pirate's ringleader, a *Capitaine* Hervieux, garbled something back in angry French, and Felicity was dropped over the side as numb as a potato.

She looked sideways at the vermin around her as they tossed

pieces of clothing back and forth like fish. They'd forgotten about their female prisoner—for the moment. Mustering her courage, Felicity assured herself the British Navy could not be too far behind. Hope was the only thing that kept her from coming undone. Weren't they only a day's sail from St. Christopher? Surely her brother Fitz would rush to the rescue in his sloop-o-war the moment he heard she had been captured by pirates. He'd written back to Mama and said that Felicity could come. He must be waiting.

A breeze riffled through Felicity's unpinned hair and cooled the burning sensation on her scalp. What misfortune, and it had sounded so easy in the beginning. Sail to St. Christopher, uphold every standard of propriety in West Indies society, make an advantageous match, and keep the Barrow family scandal as quiet as possible. Now look at her. Kidnapped by pirates. It was a thousand times worse than what Femy had done.

It wasn't fair. Felicity never danced with a partner more than once, never went out without gloves, and now she would be ruined if she was not murdered in the middle of nowhere. She'd let the family down.

A cry from the crow's nest silenced the ship, and Felicity followed the gazes of her captors. They looked aft, some with slackened jaws. Her heart rose with hope. She tugged against her bindings, and rough hemp scratched her arms as she peered toward the western horizon. There it was. Yes. Another vessel skimming across the water and drawing near.

"Les pirates!" Capitaine Hervieux shouted, and it echoed off the sails. Felicity's mind spun in disbelief. More pirates?

All hands flew into action, and for the second time that day, Felicity braced herself for ear-splitting cannon fire. The fresh fear made her faint with anxiety. Edward had promised she would be safe, but Caribbean waters were still a flurry of perilous activity. It'd all been a lie!

No doubt Edward, now Lord Barrow, had written to Fitz immediately after Femy's elopement and insisted Felicity come to the Indies. Mama was just as determined, for with twin boys and the youngest child remaining from a brood of seven, her second daughter was quite in the way. Edward had said it was the best thing for the family, and Felicity had relented.

She tried to ignore the pounding of her heart. The thick air tasted hot, and she felt wet, exhausted, and afraid. It should have

been Fitz making chase beyond her captors' stern, but instead it was just more cutthroats.

Felicity clenched her teeth and began to work the ropes on her wrists with more ardor. *Capitaine* Hervieux had made no move to molest her, and she suspected it was because she'd given him the names of her family and her brother's ship. Perhaps it was possible she'd be released unharmed, or there would be a ransom.

Grunting, she tugged on the bindings again and glanced at the approaching vessel. She should have put up a fight. What good had it done to submit to these thieves? The new oncoming marauders must be worse. Surely pirates bold enough to attack their own would be murderous. Being a lady or a Barrow wouldn't save her this time.

Now Flick, something reminded her, *you can hold your own*. Was it Papa's voice, or something she imagined Fitz would say? Either way, they were both right. Born between two older and two younger brothers, Felicity was no stranger to teasing, torture, and the art of self-defense, but could she do it when her life actually depended upon it? What to do about propriety with no one to save her, she did not know.

Felicity watched a pair of cannonballs arc over the surface of the sea with a *poof*! from the enemy's chasers. One splashed harmlessly into the water to leeward, but the other pounded into the stern with a sickening crack. More cries ensued, and frantic, she jerked until she finally scraped free.

The crew of the *Anguille* was too busy preparing their defenses to bother with a female. Ducking under rope lines, Felicity clambered around the nearest hatch belching up pirates and raced past the capstan to a door. Blinded by darkness, she felt her way down a short passage, pushed through an opening, and found herself in a well-lit room with a row of stern windows. Clothes and dirty dishes were strewn about a single table and chairs. A well-used hammock swayed from its moorings in the corner.

With a deafening crash, another cannonball found its mark. Felicity gasped as the entire ship shuttered, and the *Anguille* answered with roaring artillery of its own. Covering her ears, she threw herself into the corner beneath the hammock. The boards around her shook, and she reached for a spindly overturned chair and pulled it over herself. *Make it instant*, she thought. *Make it fast.* She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to pray, but the words

wouldn't come. *Curse you, Femy, you have finally killed your sister. I hope you're happy now!*

The world exploded into booms and groans, and Felicity pressed her forehead to the boards and imagined it was all a nightmare. She told herself she would wake up any moment in the Mayfair town house, and Mama would be at the foot of her bed. Her mother would wish her a good morning and *not* say Femy had eloped to Lamberton, and Felicity would *not* be shipped to the West Indies to find a husband, either.

Would she ever get to St. Christopher before word spread the Barrows had ruined themselves, or would sea scavengers finish her off for good? What a tragic tale. Perhaps Femy would be excused after all.



CAPTAIN THOMAS DOYLE of the privateer ship, *Defiance,* noted the *Anguille* was tilted to starboard. Now within range, he gave orders for British colors to fly and waited five extra seconds to correct his timing so he could rake the pirates' larboard side while they reloaded. Mr. Edens, his second, watched from the gunwale with pistols in his fists and a dirk between his teeth. Hopefully, the crew of the *Defiance* would not be outnumbered. The French corsairs had a fast ship, but they sailed heavy as if they'd just pilfered another vessel's cargo.

Thomas motioned for the gun captain to prepare to blast the scallywags to pieces. *Corsairs*, he mused, gripping the pommel of his cutlass while watching his chess move unfold. Some of the enemy privateers and downright filthy pirates still refused to accept the treaty that had returned St. Christopher to the hands of the British. He had no idea why these corsairs were testing his waters, but he was sure they were up to no good.

The cannons fired and swept the top deck of the *Anguille,* snuffing out their guns. With the additional aid of grappling hooks, their yardarms touched, and the ships bounced off one another with a foreboding sound of smashing planks. His crew swung across and hand-to-hand battle ensued. Thomas waited until confident his vessel was safe, and then, unable to bear feeling useless, grabbed a line, sailed over the gunwale, and planted his boots on the enemy's deck. There was nothing more important in the world to him than eliminating evil.

He decided the fierce man in the bicorn at the helm was the pirate captain. The Frenchman leered as he clashed swords with Mr. Edens. Thomas clobbered two corsairs in the head, ducked a punch, and made it to the quarterdeck just as the captain's bicorn fell, and he plopped down beside it like a lifeless doll. Thomas frowned at Mr. Edens' beaming face. His second-in-command scooped up the enemy's hat and planted it on his own head.

"Well done," Thomas groused, shoving a complacent man down the ladder. He'd wanted to take the corsair captain down. He despised villainy. Searching the deck of *Anguille,* he watched the remaining pirates drop to their knees in surrender except for two who went over the side. They shouted in rebellion, preferring to make a swim for it rather than face the iron bars of the gibbets. "I'll clean up this mess," he teased Mr. Edens, "if you want to sweep the deck below."

"Be happy to, Captain Doyle," Mr. Edens grinned. A loyal sailor since Thomas had met him in Nevis, Mr. Edens preferred hand to hand combat over cannon fire and his fists over swords. It was his limp, Thomas assumed, that made the young man want to prove himself.

"Help yourself." Thomas bit back a smile of satisfaction. In only minutes, they'd brought the French to their knees, and now had every last piece of treasure aboard to split among themselves after the King's take. Not a bad day's work for a privateer. He'd have enough to purchase Sugar Hill plantation in no time.

His crew bound the wounded and chained the prisoners together before marching them below. Thomas preferred his captives locked in their own holds rather than transferred to his vessel. Mr. Edens could sail the *Anguille* into port with a skeleton crew. He'd certainly earned it.

With repairs underway to get the hulk seaworthy again, Thomas checked a few barrels then pushed his way inside the pirate captain's quarters. All of its contents were spread across the deck, and one of the galley windows dangled from its hinges.

An odd stillness hung in the air, and suspicious, Thomas withdrew his sword. He lifted a stained shift with the tip of his blade and flicked it aside. An open trunk held a variety of boots and baldrics. He stirred them around, and finding nothing of value, approached a swinging hammock with caution. No fine bed or comfortable cot here. The French captain lived simply if not like a

pig.

He glanced at an overturned chair under the hammock and hesitated. Just as his eyes perceived a crumpled pile of dark linen, a woman with a mop of yellow hair popped up before he could reach out. He jerked in surprise and raised his sword, but his boots felt nailed to the planking.

With round, frightened eyes, the cornered woman heaved the piece of furniture at his head, and he tripped onto his backside. Smarting with irritation, Thomas spun like a Nile crocodile and flailed out with his blade, but she did not attack again. Instead, she bolted for the door.

Thomas scrambled to his feet and gave chase, snatching at a flapping ribbon tied around her waist. When he seized it at last, she fell to her knees, and he threw both of his arms around her. With a cry, her hands shot up and grabbed fistfuls of his hair, ripping them from their roots.

"Blast!" he bellowed, because "Ouch!" would have sounded cowardly. He clutched the back of her neck, surprised at how fragile it felt. She froze and arched her back in surrender, but Thomas dragged her backward, spun her about, and pushed her against the bulkhead to examine her up close. Face to face, her calamine blue-green gaze narrowed before she ducked her chin and smashed the crown of her head into his nose. It crackled, and he swore under his breath while his own eyes flooded with tears. He managed to grab an elbow as she darted past him again, and when she turned to fight, he threw his weight into her sending them both to the deck with a heavy thump. He hoped someone heard them before he was beaten to a pulp.

Flopped across her with his great girth, Thomas couldn't help but feel like a giant crushing an ant, but he was vindicated. She threw her head back, and he ducked to avoid another injury while fumbling to pin down her wrists. "Blast it, woman. It's over! You're beat. We have the crew and your captain."

"He's not my captain!" she spat in a terse, high voice. Her pale face had red smudges on the apples of her cheeks, and her eyes glowed like sunbeams sparkling off the waves.

"He's not, you say?" Thomas tried not to gloat, but he couldn't help himself. "Why you're a captain's woman if ever I've seen one." He felt his mouth creep into a smug smile and realized his nose was wet.

"You're bleeding," his captive groaned in disgust. "Get off me."

Thomas hesitated, wavering over the decision to defy the hoyden or act like a gentleman. She bucked and squirmed, so he rolled off of her but kept hold of her wrists. "Stop struggling," he ordered, reminding himself that this breathless beauty was a criminal.

"My brother will kill you," she hissed, and he thought she sounded like a furious cat.

He felt a laugh gurgle up. "Your brother? You don't look like a relative of Hervieux nor do you appear to be French, Madam."

"I'm not French, you devil!"

Thomas pushed her against the bulkhead again but kept his throbbing nose out of reach. "Manners, please," he rebuked her. "You're under arrest and are now my prisoner."

"Arrest for what?" Her bosom heaved like she might faint, and he saw it was more from fear than exertion although she put on a good show. "For piracy," he reminded her.

Her lovely water-colored eyes rounded again. "I'm not a pirate," she gaped, "I'm a prisoner!"

"You jest," he smiled. "In the captain's quarters? Fully dressed?"

"I was kidnapped this morning, sir!" The young woman snapped her jaws shut. He watched her force back tears of frustration. At least hers were from offense and not a broken nose.

Thomas wiped his face with his sleeve and watched her lip curl as he tried to stop the bleeding with what remained of his dignity. There was something dainty about her beneath the squared shoulders and fierce expression. "If you had fought the pirates like you fought me, I suspect you'd still be aboard your ship with your family—if it's true."

"Yes, I ascertained that after standing tied to the foremast for several hours." She glared at him and tried to shake his hands from her wrists, but he tightened his hold in case she was bluffing. "However, they only robbed me. You attacked."

A sense of foreboding crept up on Thomas's heels. "You're a prisoner?"

"I'm a victim, you dolt," she insisted. "Now let me go. You're hurting me."

Thomas hesitated. He would have been sure she was a French spy except for the lack of accent. "You don't fight like a lady," he grumbled.

"You do," she snorted.

Thomas was considering the ostentatious humor in her reply when Mr. Edens burst into the room. His jaw dropped.

"Finally," complained Thomas, "she nearly killed me."

Mr. Edens pointed over his shoulder with large eyes. "We had a small skirmish on the way to the hold, but the prisoners are contained."

The woman in Thomas's arms struggled again.

"Do you want me to take her below?" Mr. Edens sounded hopeful.

Thomas frowned. "Apparently, the lady is a victim or so she says."

Mr. Edens raised his chin as if comprehending something. "So, it is true."

"What's true?" Thomas looked sideways at him with dread.

"One of the frogs claimed they took a prisoner from a prize this morning."

"That would be me," the woman pointed out.

Thomas felt mild shame flicker on his cheeks. He stared at the bulkhead in disbelief then lowered his gaze to his thick, heavy hands pinning her down like meat hooks. She eyed him from beneath lowered lids, but despite the threatening pretense, a green-blue vein pulsed wildly in her neck. Thomas blinked to push aside his muddled thoughts. He had a duty to protect the Leeward islands' waters, even if he must capture and hand over a beautiful woman.

"Madam, I am Captain Doyle of the *Defiant* and authorized by the Crown. If you are as innocent as you claim to be, I will need the name of your family," he challenged her. Mr. Edens stepped inside and crossed his arms to look threatening, too.

The woman stiffened her spine. "Barrow," she said in a tone spiked with contempt. "I am Miss Barrow, daughter of the Right Honourable Edward Lucas Barrow, and sister of Commander Fitzwilliam Barrow of the Royal Navy." She let out a heavy breath that sounded much like relief. "I am utterly shocked you hold a captain's rank, sir. Now take me home."



BARROW? THOMAS HELD a wet cloth to his nose and sank into his berth. Fitz Barrow? He closed his eyes and dropped his head between his knees. Why in the world had Fitz Barrow's sister fought

like a wildcat? And how? He'd mistaken her for a member of the crew even though she didn't look the part. True, it was self-preservation that made him fight, but if he was honest, a certain primal attraction had allowed him to enjoy it. She was as slender and strong as a palm tree in a hurricane, and almost as tall, which was saying a great deal considering his impressive height.

He groaned under his breath. If he'd been any rougher, he might have seriously injured or killed her. Fortunately, the *Defiant's* surgeon had decided she was nothing more than scraped, sunburned, and in need of water or ale. She was lucky to have been rescued, and fortunate the corsairs had been too busy in the time leading up to the *Defiant's* arrival to do her irreparable harm.

He frowned. Miss Barrow seemed more horrified by the idea she'd been kidnapped rather than what actually could have happened. And a Barrow? How on earth would he explain to Fitz he'd tackled his sister, and worse, liked it?

Thomas flopped down and sprawled out on the narrow bunk. His nose throbbed from being clobbered by the elegantly violent Miss Barrow, but the rest of him did not because his crew had done most of the work.

You were not much of a captain today, Doyle, he scolded himself. He'd held the *Defiant*, of course, but Mr. Edens should have left him something to do besides round up another officer's sister. He groaned aloud. How could he have wildly attacked an innocent woman? He'd never raised a finger to a female in his life. Miss Barrow had certainly made a muck of things. He wouldn't be able to buy back Sugar Hill if her brother decided to challenge him to a duel, and Thomas had just convinced Fitz to agree to forty percent of the *Defiant's* prize money in exchange for the derelict plantation. It was only up to the new Lord Barrow at home to agree to it now.

The deal was fair for Thomas, but a risk for the Barrows, for who knew how much income he might acquire in the allotted time of four years? Would Fitz change his mind when he learned Thomas wrestled his sister to the deck instead of rescuing her from pirates?

Another horrible thought pierced Thomas's mind. Even if the agreement to exchange Sugar Hill for the *Defiant's* prize money was not negated, he might be forced to marry her. He pinched his nose, tossed the stained cloth to the floor, and dragged himself out of the berth. Fitz Barrow knew how he felt about that. A duel would be preferable to being chained down the rest of his life, and Thomas

had promised himself he'd never imprison a woman in a marriage like his father had his mother. Ever. Even if that meant being shot by his good friend.

Hmmph. There was no time to worry about it. He had a ship to sail and a guest in the steward's quarters that needed to be calmed and cared for before they reached St. Christopher. No one needed to know she'd been sullied by pirates—and a privateer.



Chapter Two



Impatient and hot, Felicity settled onto the corner of the cot in her tiny room that was nothing more than a closet. She could not bear to check under the bedding to see if it was clean. It was too late anyway; she'd slept on it two nights in a row. She'd tried her best to braid her hair without any help and wiggled herself into a clean shift and walking dress. She was lucky to have them. She knew she should be grateful to the pirate-hunting Captain Doyle for retrieving her belongings, but it was difficult under the circumstances. Her pride still steamed—a pirate's woman, indeed! She was shocked at her own behavior, too, but something inside of her had snapped when he'd laid his hands on her.

It felt like it was well past morning. The steward had dropped off a tray of sliced fruit and an ugly biscuit and informed her they would soon arrive to her brother's island home. She'd gobbled the food down, repentant that she had refused to dine with Captain Doyle the evening before. He'd hardly spoken a word to her when she felt brave enough to take a turn around the deck for fresh air, so it just didn't seem right to join him at his table, not without Mrs. Packwood. Besides, English or not, the towering bear-like captain with dark hair and eyes made her feel uncomfortable.

He was beastly, she'd presumed, but after quietly apologizing for the misunderstanding, Captain Doyle had escorted her to his privateering ship, a gleaming brigantine bustling with activity that faltered when she was lofted over the gunwale. The solid muscle under his coat had felt like a sea wall rather than a seaman as he helped her maneuver from one vessel to another. She could not bear to look upon his brutishly handsome countenance again, for the threatening dark eyes had gradually lightened into cool shadows, and the bracing stance and tight jaws relaxed into the intelligent, observant visage of a gentleman—if not a rather hulkish one.

The captain's steward, a Mr. Keeble, gave up his space when Felicity tersely refused to take over the captain's quarters. She could not forget what he'd accused her of and would sleep in a cask before taking his bed. Taciturn, he'd stowed her away next door with the proper necessities delivered, and they did not converse again. So with the invitation to dine the day before they were to drop anchor, she stubbornly chose to claim she was still in shock and needed her rest. And she was in shock. She had come to St. Christopher to save her reputation that Femy had tarnished, and corsairs and privateers had ruined everything.

The ship lurched, and Felicity moved over to peek out a tiny porthole. A looming green island made her relax. Trees and flowers and crystal clear water looked like a painting of Paradise.

When at long last the time came to disembark, Felicity walked with supreme poise to the waiting longboat, but only Mr. Keeble saw her tucked away with her things. The jaw-dropping scene around her was interesting enough to ignore the ship's captain, but in the end there was no temptation because Captain Doyle of the *Defiant* did not bother to accompany her to shore.

COMMANDER FITZ BARROW was waiting for Felicity along the wharf with a rather medieval-looking wagon and even sorrier horse, but she didn't care. "Welcome to St. Kitts, or St. Christopher that is!" he called.

"Fitzwilliam," she cried, laughing and tearing up at the same time. A look of concern disappeared, and Fitz's charming grin lit his face as he threw his arms around her rather than bow. Ignoring what anyone thought, Felicity squeezed him back. How familiar he smelled. Being with Fitz was as good as being home.

The captain's crew tossed her things into the back of the rickety wagon as Felicity assured her brother she was well enough and overjoyed to see him at last. He lifted her to the wagon seat. "And now you will see how I live, Flick," he teased. "There are no orchards and our gardens are small."

"I do not mind it at all," Felicity breathed. "I'm just happy to be alive." She glanced toward the tangle of masts and sails floating on the water and tried to feel secure. "St. Christopher is much safer than the sea, I hope."

"Of course it is," sang Fitz. "No one gets by me or my ship."

"I'm relieved to hear it." Felicity thought with trepidation of the scandal in her wake and swallowed. "I hope rumors and gossip are thwarted easily as well."

Fitz raised a brow with a mischievous look that said he already knew a great deal about what she planned to tell him. "Thankee!" he called over his shoulder to the men, and the *Defiant's* crew went on their way without so much as a goodbye or good luck. Felicity gripped her hands, her head wheeling one way and another at the foreign sights around her.

The sunny town of Basseterre seemed as busy and loud as London with cobbled streets, carts, and crowds, while screaming gulls oversaw everything from the rooftops. Besides the weather, the only difference was a large blue bay sat like a puddle on the coastline, and jungled volcanic peaks soared into the clouds beyond buildings made of weathered ballast stones. It was beautiful, but Felicity's expectations of a genteel sprawling country house nested on a high hilltop were squashed the moment her brother's hired wagon jerked to a stop. They were less than a mile from the smelly, low-lying wharves.

"This is it?" She clutched the lovely emerald cloak Mama had sacrificed and felt her pearl earbobs rattle. The cloak was of fine merino wool, but she was hot, dirty, and tired, and desperately needed something to hold onto. "This is Sugar Hill?"

"No, it's mine." Fitz's modest home was narrow and like his neighbors', of white-washed rock set on a timber frame and earth foundation. "Sugar Hill is in the hills," he said with a wink. "You must endure a little thatched roof here. We can't all have wooden shingles." He clambered down with the driver to help unload her things.

"You aren't settled there? Mama said I would live with you in a lovely tropical home with a view of the sea."

"No, Flick," he grinned, calling her by the nickname her brothers had assigned her at birth, "I leased it out. The old place was in disrepair when our grandfather bought it and nothing was ever done. Papa toured the island only once and found the property dismal and depressing. That's why we don't raise sugarcane—along with, um, other reasons."

"What other reasons?"

"You'll see." Fitz held up a hat box balanced in his palm. "Did you really bring such frivolities all the way to the equator?"

Felicity raised her brows. "You know why I came." She wondered why they did not send Femy and her paramour instead. "While I'm thankful to be here safely at last, I do have a purpose and those are necessary."

"I guess we must thank Doyle for saving your things *and* your skin."

Felicity pursed her lips and held her tongue. The dark, lumbering Captain Doyle had not even bothered to take her ashore. He'd sent a message to Fitz then dumped her into a longboat with a stale-smelling crew led by Mr. Edens, who smiled and winked at her from the corner of his eye when no one was looking.

"He may have saved my skin, but he did little else. You know why I am here."

"Yes, yes, I read the letters," Fitz grumbled. He brushed past her to the bright blue door of the white-washed stone cottage that nearly touched its neighbor. "I am to tuck you under my wing until you find a rich or titled husband." He grunted like it was a nasty task. "Or both."

Felicity felt her cheeks color when he put it that way, and the driver behind her gave a barking laugh. How impertinent, but really, this was a strange, impertinent world, barely holding fast to the hem of all things tasteful. It was nothing like home.

She followed Fitz through the front door into the cool shade of the diminutive house but stopped in surprise. A woman with silvery braids on her crown met her at the door of a small parlor that was probably the only choice for a drawing room. The servant looked her over from head to toe then dropped a quick curtsey.

"Oh, Mrs. Harris. There you are!" Fitz dropped Felicity's trunk and hat boxes to the ground. "Flick, this is my housekeeper and cook, and well, all around watchman." The two smiled at each other. "She'll be your companion, just so you know, and I've warned her all about you."

"Me?" Felicity knew he was teasing but pretended to be offended anyway. She said nothing about the fact that a housekeeper was no more suitable a companion for a Barrow than a vicar's distracted wife. No maid. No chaperone. It seemed nothing here was like home except her brother. He was still the same.

"Oh, yes," Fitz scowled. "You rise early, cannot bear anything out of its place, and everything must be as proper as pie."

"Oh heavens, Fitz! I'm not that terrible."

"Maybe not, I suppose, but I do know you can be trusted to make sure everything is shipshape, including ourselves." Chuckling, he started up a set of narrow, steep stairs. "Now let me show you your room, and you can tell me all about what our dreadful family has done and how you plan to catch a husband."

The whole house didn't need to hear about Femy's scandal. Felicity winced. She'd been kidnapped by pirates, rescued by a boorish privateer, and would not be living in the fine house on Sugar Hill—wherever that may be. She peeked back at Mrs. Harris, but the woman had disappeared with a swish of her apron, so hopefully she hadn't heard. The newly arrived Miss Barrow was single, practically alone, and all but ruined and desperate for a husband, and that story would spread as fast as flames.



FITZ OFFERED FELICITY a small, bright room at the top of the narrow stairs. He'd moved his things to the other side of the cottage facing the street. She was grateful for her modest situation although it was simple compared to the brick manor in the Worcestershire countryside or the elegant town house in Mayfair. After the surprise of learning she would not be living in spacious quarters like she was accustomed to, Felicity decided she rather appreciated the cozy cottage over her former tumultuous, crowded households. The luxuries of a plantation home set on a hill with an island view faded into the background of her expectations. She had less to worry about and less worry at the moment suited her.

Hardly believing she had been settled in a fortnight, Felicity did a full turn, squinting to see her gown in the small looking glass above her dressing table. She looked very well compared to when she'd arrived on the island, and she felt better, too. Fitz had quizzed her about her scare aboard the pirate ship and comforted her through a round of tears that arrived at length after she thought too much about what she'd survived and what could have happened. There was only one night of bad dreams, and he'd slept in the chair beside her bed until she convinced herself a Barrow was made of sterner stuff. No wonder he had always been her favorite brother.

"Flick?"

Felicity gave an exasperated sigh at Fitz's address shouted from across the hall. Mama would not approve. "Do come in."

The gown would have to do. It was blue with a high waist and a

peachy ribbon added to the statement. She bit her lip in consternation and examined her hair. Mrs. Harris had offered a friend's daughter as a personal maid, but the young woman did not have the hairdressing skills the Barrow sisters enjoyed at home. Together with Mrs. Harris's help, Felicity decided to sort it out herself. For a fleeting moment, she wondered who was doing Femy's hair or if she had anyone at all.

Felicity pursed her lips, torn between sisterly affection and disappointment. It was Femy's fault she was in the Indies. No teas and no plethora of balls. No ton. How could she do everything her family expected on a sandy rock in the middle of the sea?

Fitz sauntered in looking handsome in his blue dress jacket and gold trim. She noted the epaulette on his left shoulder signifying his rank and smiled. "I'm not sure about this, Commander. Our sister wore apricot."

"She's not dead, Flick, you can utter her name, and you won't catch a scandal from wearing one of her gowns. It's not a cold."

Felicity frowned. "Mama does not speak her name." How could he be so forgiving?

Ignoring her, Fitz commented, "You will enjoy morning dress here, and afternoons, too. A fine muslin is all the rage in this heat and rain no matter how sheer."

"Rain?" Felicity's eyes rounded at the knowledge of what damp could do to a sheer muslin clinging to the body. "The ladies must go around looking stark naked," she exclaimed.

Fitz pushed back a swag of netting and perched on the end of her bed. "Too many to notice, and besides, it can rain for weeks on end in this place and did as much as six feet last year."

"Indeed? I thought London damp."

Her brother waved his hand around to stir the air. "It dries up fast with the sultry heat. Sort of," he mused.

She gave a curt nod. "I'll wrestle with that when the time comes. For now..." Felicity held up the hem of her gown. "Are you sure this will do? It is my first concert after all."

"Yes," he assured her, "and I'm sorry I have not taken you out for more introductions. I don't think old Mr. Bradshaw or the butcher and my favorite stableboys are what Mama had in mind."

"I should say not, but I don't mind it," Felicity insisted, for she wanted acquaintances and friends, too, not just a match. "I've met your wonderful housecook and neighbors." She curled her lip in

amusement, for their neighbor, Mr. Bradshaw, was ancient and had flirted with her shamelessly when they were introduced. "I'm also becoming quite friendly with the woman at the market who sells those..."

"Breadfruit?"

"Yes," Felicity nodded. "I like it very much. I shall miss it when I go home."

"Well," teased Fitz, "you are in a hurry, aren't you? I'd hoped to keep you with me as long as I may be posted here, but I did promise our esteemed brother and Mama I would introduce you to any of the nobility who have not passed off their responsibilities to bookkeepers or overseers."

"Like Papa did with Sugar Hill?"

"He let them all go," Fitz reminded her with a frown, and Felicity frowned, too, although she did not know anything about what transpired on the sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Not everyone appeared to find them a delight as she had been led to believe, but she had not seen her family holdings. Perhaps they actually were everything she'd imagined.

Fitz was still contemplating suitors. "At least you have met the honourable Captain Doyle, although I daresay the circumstances were unfortunate. He was on my list, but he is not titled and has no interest in a wife."

"You have a list?"

Fitz snickered.

Felicity felt her cheeks tingle with warmth, and strangely, disappointment. She was having a difficult time not thinking about the hulking man. With thick hair the color of polished walnut, not to mention heavy, wideset eyebrows to match, he reminded her of a savage that had swum up out of the sea. She remembered a rather appealing sunspot on his apricot-colored cheek, just below the corner of his eye, a grace that saved him from looking overly ruthless and stormy. With a deep scar running straight through the other eyebrow, was it any wonder she took the man for a pirate?

"I am lucky to be alive." She turned to the dressing table and picked up her new reticule. "Perhaps you should consider giving me fencing lessons again. I mean with a foil or whatever weapon you think appropriate. No one has to know. The Indies is not Mayfair to be sure."

"That's not a bad idea. I'm impressed you survived Captain

Doyle," grinned Fitz.

Felicity grimaced. She had panicked and was lucky. Captain Doyle was the one person she did not want to meet again, although he'd made a hasty attempt to assure her he sailed a King's ship with a letter of marque. If he'd been half as honourable as his pretenses, he would have at least made an offer to marry her after what had happened, not that she would have accepted. She was in a hurry to succeed and return home, but not that much.

"As you know, we met under the most shocking circumstances, and I *had* to defend myself although I did so poorly. That is scandal enough should anyone consider it." Felicity gave her chin an airy toss. "No, you must take him off the list if you have one. I cannot marry a man that mistook me for a pirate, and he certainly has not bothered to ask."

Fitz exploded into laughter, and she tensed. It wasn't that the captain had actually hurt her, but he'd frightened her and made insulting insinuations. Whatever he'd told Fitz in his hasty missive sent from the *Defiant* while avoiding accompanying her ashore, could not have been the whole truth because Fitz seemed to have found their introduction astounding if not amusing.

"I have known Doyle for years," he reminded her, "first in the Navy, and these days there is some business between us." He sighed. "Or was, but never mind that, you are fortunate. If it weren't for him you might never have seen St. Christopher at all. I owe him for saving your life—and virtue. I could not insist he marry you, too, although he probably has a great deal of money I suspect. A privateer always has something under the books."

Felicity frowned, knowing she would be officially ruined in London if society learned she'd spent hours imprisoned on a French corsair's ship and then was tackled and pinned by a privateer; ruined even more than Femy. She hoped the gossips on St. Christopher did not write home often.

"While I'm grateful to have survived, he did not even bother to escort me ashore," she complained. "He hardly acted concerned for my fate, and that's not a proper gentleman in my book—wealthy or not." She heaved a sigh and turned back to the glass watching Fitz's reflection.

"If you say so," he shrugged.

"Oh, Fitz," sighed Felicity. "I don't mean to sound like a snob. I despise I must go on the hunt for a sweetheart rather than wait for

fate to do her part. You know I was in no hurry, even at four and twenty, because I hoped to do it right. Now thanks to our sister who shall go unnamed, I must do something at once and something brilliant, or Mama has promised never to leave her room or return to town."

Fitz grunted. "Now that I don't believe. What a mess Edward has made of things. Papa would whip him soundly."

"He should have more often," Felicity agreed, "but it's not his fault what Femy has done. Mama spoiled him like milk."

"Yes, and Femy, too. Well then, it's up to us second-born Barrows to save the family name." Fitz climbed to his feet, smoothed down his breeches, and gave her an appraising nod. "You do look as pretty as ever, Flick, and with no lazy lords or spinster sisters to ruin your chances, I'm sure you will catch someone's eye before we put you on the shelf."

Felicity's laugh sputtered as she reached for her gloves. "Promise me if I do not make a match fast enough to suit you, you will send me back to England in my wretched single state as soon as you dare." She really did not want to marry so desperately, but she knew now that she was here she must carry on. Duty was duty.

Fitz held out his arm. "We know you will do what's expected, sister, for Felicity Barrow always does what's right. Besides, Edward would have my head if I sent you back unwed, not to mention our mama."

Felicity offered Fitz a tight smile she didn't quite feel. She had done the right thing in coming, hadn't she? Her family had insisted, and she had to acquiesce. No gentleman of the ton would ever look her way now.

Fitz cocked his head. "Are you quite sure about Doyle? He's a good man, and after all, you did kick up a lark in the corsairs' captain's quarters."

"Fitzwilliam!" Forgetting her manners, Felicity flung her reticule hard enough to punch his shoulder. "Of course I'm sure! No scandal. No improprieties. Just a proper introduction for a safe and secure match that will redeem the family." She huffed. "You and the captain have sworn not to mention a word of my kidnapping to anyone. Even Mrs. Harris cannot know."

"Well, if this were England you'd already be shackled—either to him or a corsair."

Felicity straightened her skirts. "Well, this is not England," she

sniffed back, "and I will be home soon enough—*not* wed to a pirate."



Chapter Three



Mr. James Coker, who sat on the Leeward government's assembly, was married to one of the most admirable women Thomas had ever known. The flamboyant and half-French, Mrs. Lisette Coker, insisted he attend her second concert of the year, and as she was an especial friend, he adjusted his schedule to fit in her much-esteemed social event.

An invitation to the Cokers' parties was coveted by the elite in Basseterre, and the couple's generous nature that welcomed guests of lesser rank was welcomed by those who had money but were in want of connections. Besides, a great many of the English living in the Indies had aptitudes for musical instruments, and almost anyone properly trained could sing.

Thomas neither played nor sang, and he had no aspirations to associate with those of the upper ranks unless they provided a business opportunity. However, he enjoyed a respectable concert, and he liked the Cokers. They were as close to friends as he could count, and he was fortunate to be treated as landed gentry although his worthless father had sold Sugar Hill ages ago. The lack of a substantial inheritance had left Thomas little choice but to sell off a remaining unentailed property in faraway England, and delve into one trade or another in the islands.

The sea was all he understood. An early stint in the Navy left a bad taste in his mouth so he opted to use what money he did have to purchase a ship and letter of marque. It was better than the legacy of drunkenness and abuse among the sugar cane fields his forefathers had left him.

Thomas's lip curled as the whisper of his family's disgrace raised its shadow in his head, but he dismissed it as he strode up to the doors of the palatial government building Mrs. Coker had wheedled from officials for her own use. Volcanic grey stone protected its

exterior façade, and rows of arched windows shined in the sinking sunlight. An open hall rose two stories high with a twisting iron balustrade encircling the upstairs gallery.

Thomas circumvented silk gowns and feathered turbans and launched himself up the polished staircase for a better view. A group of officers had the same idea, and he squeezed between them for a good look. Leaning over the railing, he searched for the Cokers and took note of who was in attendance. Luckily, he did not spy his prisoner from the *Anguille*. Since he'd glided into Basseterre he couldn't help but wonder if he'd see her again.

Thomas exhaled with quiet relief. It'd been humiliating to drop anchor in port with Commander Barrow's bruised and battered sister. She'd accepted his apology without a word, refused to dine with him, and stayed in her quarters until the crew dropped the longboat to row her to the wharf. With immediate business to attend to, he'd penned a brief explanation to Fitz and sent it on its way so the commander could expect his sister. Fitz's message in return had been filled with nothing but gratitude, and they'd agreed to meet in a fortnight. Miss Barrow had not thanked him at all.

The murmuring crowd quieted as Mrs. Coker welcomed her guests with enthusiasm and invited a cellist to take his place on the stage. Unhappy with his view, Thomas sidestepped his way along the gallery skirting couples too smitten with one another to sit among the watchful eyes of society. He stopped at the next potted palm and slipped between its wide-fingered fronds only to bump into the back of a woman in sea blue silk. She rocked over the railing with a gasp, and he snatched her elbows to keep her from tumbling over. The cello began to croon a lullaby in a heart-stirring tenor tone as if he had not almost killed someone.

"Pardon me," he blurted, horrified at his faux paus. The reedy woman wheeled about, and he dropped his hands in surprise.

"Gracious alive! Captain Doyle?"

Thomas's gut *flomped* to the floor and took his heart with it. "Why, Miss Barrow. What are you doing here?"

Her buttery-colored locks were pinned up revealing a swan-like neck that made him stare. She choked back another exclamation and put a hand to her heart while her face flooded with a rosy color. "I'm with my brother," she stammered, swinging her gaze between the palm and the column as if she could see through them, "and he wanted to speak with his lieutenant. There!"

She pointed through the fronds of the plant to a crowd of officers at the other end of the gallery. Thomas had just missed them. Something like incredulity flickered in Miss Barrow's eyes. "I would have insisted on sitting downstairs if I knew I might be pushed over the railing tonight." She gave him an accusing stare, so offended, so certain, he had crashed into her on purpose.

Thomas felt a chuckle bubble up into his throat at her hysterics, but he cleared it away and tried not to smile. "It was fortunate I decided to come upstairs then. Now I have saved your life twice, Miss Barrow."

"Saved?" she repeated in a skeptical tone.

A frond freed itself from behind Thomas's shoulder and flapped between them. He pushed it away, making it necessary to inch forward. Miss Barrow moved backward as if he meant to do her harm, but before he could protest, the outline of two other guests ambled past. From the corner of his eye, he saw them stop as if noticing the couple hidden behind the palm.

"Captain Doyle," she hissed. "You cannot... We cannot... We have not been properly introduced!"

"If we had been, would whispering behind a plant be acceptable?"

"Of course it would not!" Her eyes widened in alarm.

Thomas almost laughed. She was a puzzle, this one. There was nothing rough or unseemly about her demeanor, yet she hadn't crumbled to dust when she was kidnapped by pirates. Now she was aghast to stand behind a potted plant with him as if that was worse.

He cocked his head. "Are you certain? After all, you did bash me with a wooden chair the first time we laid eyes on one another. I have my doubts on what you consider proper at all."

Miss Barrow's eyes narrowed, and he took that as fair warning. "I'll just be off then," he decided, taking a whiff of jasmine along with him as he backed out of the potential snare. "It was a pleasure to see you again, I think, although I prefer a situation where I will not be battered or trapped."

"Trapped? You're the last person I would trap, Captain."

"Then we are both satisfied." With a stinging heart, Thomas turned, and it was just his luck to find a knowing Mrs. Sanford and her daughter standing nearby when he fumbled his way out of the corner. Mrs. Sanford's eyes widened when he smiled at her. He touched his head in an unconscious salute, feeling the woman's gaze

follow him as he collided into Fitz Barrow's oncoming company.

"Doyle! You're back! Have you seen my sister?" The commander strode up in full dress uniform. He craned his neck over Thomas's shoulder. "I was just having a word with Lieutenant Shirley before the concert and failed to get her downstairs to our seats. Besides, I wanted to introduce them."

Thomas licked his lip feeling a twinge of something more than apathy at the fact Fitz wanted to introduce his sister to his officers. "She is just there." He glanced back and saw a flash of light blue between the palm fronds.

"Ah, thank you. Am I glad to see you ashore!" Fitz clapped Thomas on the shoulder.

"Glad to be ashore, I think. We were to meet at the club this Thursday. Should we make it tonight after hours instead?"

Fitz hesitated, no doubt thinking of a little quiet and good drink, but he shook his head. "I can't," he breathed, "not with Flick here now."

"Flick?"

"Oh," he chuckled, "Felicity, I mean." Fitz shrugged. "In a houseful of boys, you're going to get one nickname or another, especially if your mama is fond of naming her children with the same letters of the alphabet."

"Yes. Quite." The Barrows did have a big family, Thomas recollected. "You are one of six."

"Seven," Fitz corrected him, and Thomas masked his startled response. Being an only child had been a nightmare. "Edward, myself, Euphemia, whom we call Femy, Felicity, whom you've met, the twins, George and Gerald, and then little Genevieve, who shall be the greatest tyrant of us all."

"My, that's quite a crew."

"Yes," grinned his friend. "Besides Edward, it is Fitz, Femy, Flick, George, Gerald, and Genny. I daresay we were wild and undisciplined enough to be considered one."

Thomas could not picture it, not knowing Fitz and his poised sister. He couldn't imagine Miss Barrow behaving wildly, and yet he had seen what she could do when cornered. Her true nature came out. Before Thomas could question Fitz more, Mrs. Sanford and her quiet daughter floated by again. Ignoring Thomas, the fading redhead smiled at Fitz and nudged her daughter.

"I should fetch my sister and see to my responsibilities," blurted

the commander. "Thursday then?"

"Yes," Thomas agreed, "and thank you for your reply to my message by the by. I had no way of seeing your sister to your door quickly enough under the circumstances. I hope she has made a full recovery."

"I think so," relented Fitz. "It gave her a fright, but she is a strong, brave girl and settling in."

"I'm happy to hear it," Thomas assured him, and thinking of Miss Barrow's terse words couldn't help but add, "and I look forward to being properly introduced at your convenience." He wasn't sure, but he thought Fitz looked disheartened so he smugly assured himself he was in no danger of being forced to wed for wrestling a woman.



FELICITY WAITED UNTIL the cello's soul-stirring notes drew to a close, stepped from behind the potted palm, and glided with all of the grace she could pretend across the upstairs gallery. To her relief, she found Fitz only a few steps away whispering with another officer as if there was not a concert taking place.

"Oh, Flick, there you are," he cried. The men around him stopped whispering and stared at her as if she had a wart on her nose. Fitz smiled, and she saw a spark of anticipation flicker in his eye. He clapped the uniformed man beside him on the shoulder, and she saw from his white lapels that he was a lieutenant. The wiry officer with cherub cheeks met her stare with a pale-eyed gaze. Her stomach knotted with dread. No wonder Fitz seemed so enthused to come to the concert tonight. It was time for introductions. Did his officer know about her near-death and shameful experience?

"May I present Lieutenant Shirley, sister dear? He transferred to the *Pelican* just a few months ago, and I am delighted to have him aboard."

The lieutenant dropped his head and gave a slight bow.

"Lieutenant, my sister, Miss Barrow."

"It's an honor to meet you, Miss Barrow," remarked Fitz's officer, "we have heard a great deal about your family and are happy you have come."

"Thank you," Felicity answered trying not to flush. She wondered how much Fitz's wardroom had heard. Did they know what Femy had done and that she had come to escape the censure

of London society?

"How do you find the Indies?"

"Ah, green," replied Felicity. The gentlemen laughed. "I mean, lush," she amended. "It is the bluest blue and the greenest green, and the sun shines far more than it does at home. It's beautiful here."

"Just you wait," smiled Lieutenant Shirley, "there are more than little morning showers on the way."

"So I understand." Felicity felt much like a vase on display as she was examined by the men around her. The warmth on her cheeks became uncomfortable, but this was part of a marriageable lady's duty, despite its obvious avaricious purposes which sometimes felt unbearable. She'd nearly fled many a ballroom under the same circumstances, but not this time. Thanks to Femy.

"Well, it was wonderful to meet you, Lieutenant," she assured him, glancing at Fitz to do or say something.

He went around the rest of the circle of his acquaintances and introduced them one by one, but she could not hold onto their names. A squeak of strings alerted the hall to the next musician, and Felicity turned her attention to the stairs aching to move along.

Mama did not send her to St. Christopher to marry a sailor or men so close to her age they had not settled down. Only a respected gentleman with a title or money would do, and Fitz's cohorts were only on their way up. Besides, none of them had caught her eye and held it, no one had made her feel like... well, like packing her trunks and sneaking out into the night as Femy had done. That would take a great deal of feeling, like a blazing fire, like how it felt when Captain Doyle stopped with his face inches from hers behind the potted palm.

He had searched her eyes with a dark, depthless gaze. She shivered. She would never do it—run off into the night. A proper match was more important than feelings. She'd worry about those later. Felicity cleared her throat and tried to push away a ripple of chagrin. She gave her brother a long stare, and he excused them to escort her down the steps to find an open seat before a soprano began her aria.

Minutes later, Felicity found herself in a hard chair, but her mind wandered no matter how hard she tried to be attentive. It was difficult to enjoy any opera, much less violinists or numbers on the pianoforte after Captain Doyle had stunned her upstairs. His solid

body had bumped against hers sending her senses reeling so wildly she had to clutch the railing to keep from falling to her death. When she had turned, she found the man who smelled like salty thyme and citrus, and popped into her mind every time it wandered off. He was standing close enough to... well, to kiss her! To add to her confusion, her heart had skidded and flopped over like a scurrying kitten trying to round a corner.

The man was as thick and wide as a boar. Not to mention tall and dark. Handsome, yes. Watchful and brooding? Somewhat. Worst of all, he was arrogant, unapologetic, and tonight, teasing when he should have knelt on bended knee apologizing for what he'd presumed about her aboard the *Anguille,* not to mention cornering her behind a potted plant in plain sight of Basseterre society. He was, she thought, everything her mother had warned her about.

Felicity brushed her forehead with a gloved hand feeling hot, and it annoyed her. She'd been kidnapped by pirates and practically rescued by one. They'd fought hand to hand as if she were no lady, and she'd been rowed ashore without chaperones. Femy had not done nearly as much, and look where she'd ended up.

Felicity felt her cheeks sting with irritation. Her sister had laughed and flirted her first three seasons, and the next, she'd fallen helplessly in love, or so she claimed, a half-dozen times. Year after year, Femy would not take her duty to find a match seriously, swearing she would marry only for the deepest and most desperate kind of love, and then she'd refused an offer from a viscount whom Mama had taken great pains to interest after five failed seasons. Her sister had then wrapped up the scandalous behavior by falling in love and eloping with a new footman hired by the neighbors. It'd left Felicity, who had come out quite late because of Femy's antics, ruined and practically a spinster, too.

Felicity huffed and straightened in her chair. The music began to drone, and she leaned into Fitz, murmuring a reply to his concern for her comfort. After a time, he began to whisper names of certain gentleman in attendance that she could only see from the back or a side view. Some wore powdered wigs, hinting they were as old as Papa would have been. Her stomach felt like a coiled spring by the last round of applause. Fitz gave her a wink and took her by the elbow.

"Come, let us have some punch during the interval, and I have

one more introduction to make." He grinned with mischief. Felicity's palms broke out with damp apprehension. Could this be the one? Might tonight be the moment she met her partner for life so she could pack her things and return home?

Her heart tripped over a beat, and her breath stuck in her throat. What if Fitz meant to introduce her to one of his old, fumbling senior captains? She'd rather see a pirate ship over her shoulder again. "You do look like you are up to something," she muttered in his ear.

He fought a smile but failed to suppress it completely. "I am. As you know, our dear Lord and brother sent a list of recommendations and instructions."

"For my voyage?" she asked in confusion.

"Not exactly." Fitz nudged her to a stop, and Felicity found herself slipper to pump with a man as narrow as a plank. A slender nose led to a small chin. He met her apprehensive stare with a bright blue gaze then inclined his delicate jaw at her brother. "Good evening, Barrow. How did you find the concert?"

"Capital," Fitz decided with a slight bow.

"A soothing end to a blustery day."

"I do not mind the winds," Fitz assured him. "They keep me employed."

The man's cheeks bloomed into a smile. His attention darted back to Felicity, and she found herself forcing a smile to stay in place. He was rather nice-looking with fair brown locks and an amiable disposition.

"This is Mr. Marsh," Fitz said to her, waving his hand. "He has come from York to oversee his family's holdings for a time. Marsh, this is Miss Barrow, my sister. She has come to the Indies to make her home with me since our oldest brother is busy with a new title and responsibilities."

Felicity made a slight curtsey after Mr. Marsh's bow, and before she knew it, his hand wrapped around hers. Startled, she did not pull away as he leaned over it, though for a brief moment, she thought he might kiss it. "Charmed," he assured her in a deepening voice. He brushed his gaze across hers, a look glowing with interest and approval, and Felicity felt her smile widen despite his bold act. This was the Indies after all.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Marsh. How do you know my rascal of a brother?" she wondered.

Mr. Marsh chuckled. "It's a small island." He looked at Fitz with approval. "He's a good commander. I know I feel safer having his sloop marching up and down the coastline."

"You're safe indeed," Fitz assured him.

"How do you find St. Christopher?" Mr. Marsh asked Felicity. "Do you miss London?"

She clasped her hands, a weight lifting from her shoulders. "London, I do not," she said honestly, "but our home in the country will always have my heart. I must say though, the islands are as exotic as I ever dreamed, and I do love the fresh air. I think I could grow quite fond of it here."

He studied her. "I wish I could say the same," he replied, giving her another look of admiration. "I'm afraid I am homesick for true English soil and a cooler climate." He returned to Fitz. "We missed you at the club. I always expect you when you are in port."

"You should expect to see me less," Fitz apologized, "since I have family here now."

"How nice you are not alone. I do miss home and family," Mr. Marsh admitted. "Though I am lucky to hear from my mama every other month."

Fitz grinned. "With a crew of ninety and now a household of three, I am rarely alone, but I am ever grateful for my charming and trusted company." He wiggled his brows at Felicity, and she beamed at his compliment.

The inquisitive gentleman returned to her. "You must be anxious to put your brother's home in good order and give it a lady's touch."

"I found it already in good order if not simple and somewhat bare," teased Felicity, "but I am anxious to do my best."

Mr. Marsh looked enamored by her response. "Then I hope you will allow me to be of assistance in any way should you find yourself in need of a second opinion."

"I thank you, sir." Although flattered Mr. Marsh would trouble himself with home management, Felicity did not bother to explain they lived in a modest cottage not far from the wharves. It was hardly proper for the daughter of a baron, true, but this was a different world. Fitz cared nothing for furnishings; even less of art.

"That's fine of you, Marsh," Fitz agreed. "I'm afraid my sister will only have my cookmaid for company while I'm at sea. It's short jaunts around the island waters to be sure, but it would be good to have a trusted connection."

"I am most happy to volunteer to be of service," insisted Marsh, "for she cannot be left alone." He smiled at Felicity again. "Should you find yourself in need of an escort, you must send for me at once. I would be flattered to accommodate you."

Felicity smiled, both pleased and at ease. What good progress and at her very first event, too. "That's kind of you, Mr. Marsh."

He lifted a shoulder as if it were nothing. "We are a small community here on St. Christopher. Although I live some distance from Basseterre, it would be no trouble at all."

"Thank you."

Fitz beamed, but a sliver of hesitation pricked Felicity's heart. Despite introducing his officers and friends, her brother obviously intended to present her to the most prominent members of the island. Wasn't that the plan?

Worrying the inside of her lip, Felicity let her gaze wander the room while the two gentlemen exchanged further pleasantries. At least Femy was not here to compete with or to embarrass her. Mama had reminded Felicity she could not be choosey anymore; not after what Femy had done. No one who could offer her a secure living could be too plain, too dull, too old, or too loud. When Femy's elopement became known in St. Christopher, Felicity must be too irresistible for a suitor to care. It didn't matter if it felt perfect; it only mattered that it looked it. She took a small breath of determination.

From the great hall, a violin yelped as its strings were tested. Felicity tried not to wrinkle her brow in disappointment. They had not made it to the punch bowl. There would be more music and singing, and she would just have to be thirsty. Throwing a sorrowful glance toward the tempting refreshments, she nearly allowed an exclamation of surprise to escape her lips when Captain Doyle captured her gaze. He was holding a punch cup halfway to his lips observing the *tête-à-tête* between Mr. Marsh and her brother. Or was he watching her? Considering that made something like a candle flicker along Felicity's spine.

Ignoring a man in a bright green waistcoat babbling beside him, Captain Doyle looked Felicity up and down as if seeing her for the first time then gave a slow blink before turning away. A lump in her throat hardened, and she swallowed as she pretended not to see him. It sent a stream of fire down into her belly. She put her fingertips to her mouth and gave a small cough. Really he did not

fit in at all. He certainly was not of an elegant form; he did not have a cheerful or merry disposition, and to her knowledge, held no title or great wealth. He wasn't even a real naval officer.

Fitz roused her from the distraction. "We should take our seats," he admonished her, and giving the friendly Mr. Marsh one last smile, Felicity followed her brother back for the second half of the program. She exhaled and fanned herself as the music began, avoiding looking back for Captain Doyle to see what or who he was observing now. She was safe from pirates and ruin. She had a toe inside West Indies' society. No one knew about the family scandal. Femy was far away. Felicity waved her fan harder, gripping the ivory handle for support.

She was free to find a husband here. Lieutenant Shirley seemed kind and sincere, and Mr. Marsh looked promising. If life continued to run as smoothly as it had since her miraculous arrival to St. Christopher, she could be wed and on her way back to England to save the family name in no time. Oh how she missed home from this strange, strange world.

Felicity folded her gloves in her lap hoping she would not see Captain Doyle again before the night was through. In fact, she thought, with her heart pattering and fingers tingling, it was probably best she did not see him anymore at all. No one could know she'd been kidnapped or worse, mistaken as a pirate's lover instead of a captive. If the world heard she'd fought the bear-like Captain Doyle using a chair and her fists like a frightened lunatic, she might as well find herself a footman, too.

Chapter Four

Thomas made the long walk into town from his ramshackle quarters above the sea wearing his good coat but only a loose cravat. He did not keep a man-servant or a cook; all he needed was a roof over his head. It wasn't like anyone thought of him as a gentleman anyway. That presumption had faded through the years like the derelict house on Sugar Hill.

Evening had arrived, and the air began to cool. Thomas rented the usual horse on the outskirts of Basseterre and took his time as his equine companion trotted over the cobblestones toward their destination. Brown's, where he was to meet Fitz Barrow, lurked far enough past Pall Mall Square to be discreet, and rested between an inn and a warehouse. The private club was built of red and brown brick with a low-sloped hip roof without gables. An arched door painted a wine color had no sidelights other than a transom overhead, and the windows on the ground floor stayed shuttered, hinting nothing about its occupants.

Brown's was a comfortable place for gentlemen to indulge in friendly conversation and business without prying eyes. There were more purses emptied and more business deals secured in the upper rooms than anywhere else on the island, short of the taverns along the docks, but those were activities of a different sort.

Thomas passed off the horse, skipped over the single stone step at the entry, and slipped inside to a welcoming bow from the hall porter. Upstairs, he found Fitz in a private room shuffling a deck of cards. The young commander leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"You made it after all. I saw the *Defiant* in port. Will you be underway again soon?"

"I'm waiting on an order of canvas," Thomas explained. "It was to be shipped from Antigua but has yet to arrive." He shrugged. "My crew is happy to laze around the island or spend precious time with

their families while I watch my purses shrink."

Fitz pushed the cards to one side and clasped his hands over the round tabletop. "Speaking of family, how do you find the condition of the house after another season? I was happy to lease it to someone who did not mind. It sat useless for decades after my grandfather purchased it, you recall."

"There's a great deal needed to be done," admitted Thomas. He pulled a chair out and slid into it across from the officer. "I don't blame your father for letting the old overseer go; he let the place fall into ruin just as he did the fields." Not that Thomas minded it, but he wouldn't say so.

Fitz *harrumphed*. "I am glad my brother finally agreed to do something with it. My father found the Indies too coarse for his liking. The process of producing sugar was a shock to his manners. I daresay he would have rather my grandfather never purchased it at all."

"Mine was not the happiest of men to let it go as shabby as it was," shared Thomas, "but he could not keep a coin in his pocket any longer than he could keep a friend at his side." He pushed down a snarl. He did not want to talk about his father. Edgar Doyle had been native to the Indies like Thomas, but that was where their similarities ended. "He was a gentleman of the worst sort as you've probably heard; a violent drunkard no better than a river tick. Sugar Hill is a reflection of that."

"I'm sorry," murmured Fitz, "I did not know. I miss Lord Barrow. He was a good man and a fair father." He made a soft noise under his breath. "Though I daresay he could have trained my brother to keep away from the gaming tables."

Thomas nodded in sympathy although it was where they both sat now. "It's a poor habit to indulge in if you're no good at cards."

"Indeed." Fitz hummed then said, "Oh!" and fumbled in his coat pocket. "I'm afraid I have regretful news, and after all you have done for us, too. It involves my sister."

Thomas straightened in his chair, aware that his heart had stumbled in his chest. Fitz cleared his throat and unfolded a rumpled sheet of paper. "My brother, Lord Barrow, has sent instructions regarding my sister, Flick."

Would the Barrows insist he marry her since he'd discovered her with corsairs and then had a row? Thomas squeezed his fists. He would not. There would be no driving a woman mad with an

unwanted attachment. He'd promised himself. He'd promised his mama.

"I gave you my word that my crew and I would say nothing about how she was discovered," Thomas reminded Fitz. "There may be a little talk amidships, but no one in town will hear enough of it to matter."

"Oh, it is not that," Fitz assured him. "It's that Sugar Hill is no longer available as it is to be my sister's dowry."

"Dowry?"

Fitz winced. "I'm sorry I did not know. My brother, Edward, has only recently changed his mind, but I see no reason why you cannot stay on there until she finds a match."

"So she's here to find a match."

"In a manner of speaking," the commander admitted. "She had no luck in any Season, and now at four and twenty, my family thought it best she visit me for a while. I do want her to be happy, and we get on well."

"How convenient." Thomas felt dizzy as he realized what this meant. No wonder Miss Barrow was so concerned with propriety. She was husband hunting, and that meant her success would steal away his family home. "You mean Sugar Hill is no longer under consideration to be sold. That I cannot buy it from you."

Disappointment cascaded over Thomas like a billowing black cloak. How he wanted that land. To make it right. To erase his father's legacy. If it took all of his income and savings there was nothing he would not do to burn the cursed house of pain and horror to the ground.

His frustration must have shown for Fitz had the decency to look sorry. "I know we discussed a percentage of the *Defiant's* prize money in exchange for the property, but my family's situation has changed with the marriage of another sibling. Femy, to be exact."

"Oh, I see." Thomas did not see. "Congratulations."

Is this why Miss Barrow had sailed alone nearly to the equator? Were they all out of respectable gentlemen in London, or had Miss Barrow gone a round of fisticuffs with another captain and humiliated herself before the ton? She'd certainly been hiding behind the potted plants at the concert like she might make a mistake. The irony would have amused Thomas except for the fact his former family land was no longer for sale.

"Yes, well." Fitz slipped the paper back into his coat pocket and

returned to shuffling his deck of cards. "My mother agreed it would be a good opportunity for her to see more of the world despite the risks, and I do not mind having Flick about. A change of climate—and crowd—are good for her if you ask me. We've always gotten on, and I don't want her to be forced into a hurried or unpleasant arrangement just to relieve my brother of his conscience and responsibilities."

Fitz's concern for his sister's future happiness was moving. Thomas sat back in his chair, his mind whittling away one possibility after another. "I suppose I could bide my time; perhaps I might purchase it after she's wed."

Fitz bobbed his fair hair in agreement. "That's a possibility, and should anyone see the state of the place it would be of no great temptation. It is practically overgrown."

"I had no intention of trying to cut back the forest. I never meant to farm it anyway."

"What did you mean to do with it then?" Fitz fanned out the cards across the table.

Thomas leaned back in his chair. "There are men in my crew, and men on this island, who struggle to keep a roof over their heads. Their choices are limited when they decide to marry or start a family, and a boarding house won't do. That's why I want the land. All my life I've dreamed of buying it back and building a neat row of cottages with spaces for gardens—a simple residence that a man of modest income can afford. The big house can rot."

"That's admirable, Doyle, and very charitable."

"It feels like the right thing to do."

Fitz gave him a wink. "Speaking of charity, perhaps you might consider my sister if you've decided you're keen on marriage and family. The land would come with her hand."

Thomas gave him a look of polite apology to mask his inner horror. After what had transpired between Miss Barrow and himself, it was a wonder he had not been forced to take her to the alter. She clearly had no expectations of him, and with no title or treasure trove, he could not be much of a temptation at nearly ten years her senior. Perhaps she thought he was not good enough, and surprisingly, she was probably right.

"Marriage? No," he thanked his acquaintance, "I can only accept your offer to stay at Sugar Hill until she finds a husband."

"If you're sure," relented Fitz rather sorrowfully, but Thomas was

sure the disappointment was a pretense.

"Short of Mrs. Coker, I have never met a woman who enjoyed the institution after the wedding day," he explained, "so I have no desire to hold one prisoner for life as my father did my mother."

Fitz made a noise of understanding, and Thomas knew he'd scored his point. Miss Barrow would just have to marry someone who would be happy to take a privateer's money in exchange for Sugar Hill.

He would have to see that it happened that way, for there was no way in heaven he would ever consider doing it. Mama gave up her life to escape her sentence, he reminded himself. He needed Sugar Hill to end it all for the both of them, to finish their story and erase what was left of Papa, but he wouldn't drag another woman into the Doyle tragedy to do it.



FELICITY AWOKE TO THIN beams of light shining between the slats of her shutters. She stretched then sat up in a languid way to shake the webs of deep sleep from her mind. The odors of breakfast drifted up from the small kitchen house outside her window. She inhaled deeply.

Mrs. Harris was preparing breakfast which meant Fitz would be up as well, shuffling through papers in his study and sending and receiving messages from the docks until he walked down to the water. She slid out of bed and wrapped herself in a dressing gown, deciding to have her light morning meal in the small dining room below.

Felicity rather liked the small table there that stood near the windows to the back garden. The sun always rose on the vegetables, and a rainbow of butterflies made it feel like she was at home in the country. A happy difference was that it was less crowded within these walls compared to the great activity that came with a family of nine. Felicity had quickly come to adore Fitz's quiet little abode between the sea and the dazzling green hills even if it was humble.

After combing her hair, she pulled it back with a simple ribbon and traipsed down the stairs. The house felt still, and she decided that Fitz was asleep, else he had risen early after his night at the club to see to his ship or supplies.

A plate of fruit waited for her on the table. Felicity plopped into a chair, scooted it loudly across the floor to face the garden, and

picked through the bounty of green fig and slices of roasted breadfruit. She let early morning sunbeams warm her and slipped her gown from her shoulders. Surely a few minutes of sunlight would not leave her red and spotted. She inhaled her newfound freedom and threw a welcoming smile toward the door when Fitz stumbled in. Only it wasn't her brother.

Captain Doyle squinted, ducked his head, and grumbled, "Do you always blind yourself into sobriety in the mornings?"

Speechless, Felicity gaped. He was barefoot in fawn-colored breeches with his shirt untucked and buttoned only halfway up. It exposed a thick neck and broad chest with dark curling hair, and he was mysteriously tanned where a gentleman should not be. Her blood ran cold then turned hot, and she took a small breath that knitted her throat.

Captain Doyle rubbed his eyes and pulled his hands down his whiskered face. He leaned forward then straightened so fast his shoulders snapped back. "Miss Barrow," he exclaimed in a hoarse voice. He met her shocked look with widened eyes. "What are—"

Felicity realized he was staring and swallowed a mouthful of breadfruit before it choked her. She looked down. Her night dress billowed open at the neckline, and her shoulders and arms—nearly everything—were bare. Pushing back in the chair and jumping to her slippers, she fumbled with the dressing gown.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

She looked up in alarm. "I would ask you the very same thing, sir. I live here as you very well know, and I'm having my breakfast. Alone, I presumed, so..."

She didn't go on to explain that with so little staff and family in the house, she did not feel it inappropriate to have breakfast in her night dress. Fitz would not mind it, and the only other person in this tiny abode was Mrs. Harris. "Are you... inebriated?" she scolded, averting her gaze. She felt her cheeks roasting and tried not to look at Captain Doyle all undone.

"Me? What? No," he refuted. "I only forgot you might be awake. You will never find me in my cups," he added, deciding to hastily tuck in his shirt. "I beg your pardon. I did not mean to—I mean, I thought you were..."

Felicity exhaled but kept her gaze averted. "My brother?" she sniffed. "I have no idea where he is, although I suspect his condition." She crossed her arms over herself and frowned. "I

suppose I have you to thank for that."

"Oh, no. We had business to discuss, and of course, he wanted to know what I knew about the scallywags who attacked your ship. Also, I – I have received word from the couple who accompanied you to the Indies." He patted his shirt down as if looking for something. "My coat," he grumbled. "I had a letter."

The ridiculousness of the moment made Felicity's head spin. How could Fitz let Captain Doyle into the house without letting her know? "Where is my brother, sir?"

Captain Doyle grimaced. "I brought your brother home in the middle of the night, Miss Barrow. He was having a difficult time toeing the line if you get my meaning."

"You had nothing to do with him becoming inebriated and thoughtless?"

"No," the man assured her. "He did that to himself with a little encouragement from a few others." Fastening the last button on his shirt, Captain Doyle put his hands on his hips. "I never encourage anyone to overindulge and consider it a mark of my good character that I never do at all."

"Mmm," hummed Felicity. "I have four brothers, sir."

"So I understand." Captain Doyle studied her with something akin to curiosity. "I suppose that explains why you know how to thrust your head right up a man's nose just so."

Felicity covered a spurt of laughter with a quiet cough. "My father made sure I could defend myself from a very young age. My brothers ensured I became proficient."

"Well then," Captain Doyle replied, now collected, "I will take that to mind should I ever need another sparring partner."

Felicity dropped her jaw in offense. "That would hardly be proper. In fact—" She hesitated at the sound of clumsy footsteps in the hall. Captain Doyle looked back just as Fitz stumbled in, wearing an unbuttoned waistcoat over a billowing shirt. He raised an arm to shield himself from the sun. "Oh, Flick, you're up."

"Of course, I am." She frowned at him. "Your hair looks like a bird nest." He grunted, wavered, then reached out to steady himself on Captain Doyle's arm. "You did not tell me we would have an overnight guest," she added sternly.

"Oh!" Fitz put his hand over his gaping mouth in a comical maneuver. "I did not expect it, Mama." Felicity nearly threw her spoon in frustration at his teasing.

"It was late," Captain Doyle explained to his friend. "You asked me to escort you home, and since I did not bring the horse from Brown's, I helped myself to the settle in the parlor."

"All well and good," Fitz beamed. He slapped the captain on the shoulder.

Felicity cleared her throat and gave her brother a meaningful look.

"Huh?"

"We have not been properly introduced," she reminded Fitz in a tight voice.

"But you've already met." Fitz looked confused. Of course they had but under the most indecorous of situations. Not that this one was any better. Felicity stared and waited.

"Oh, right then," huffed her brother. He made a wobbly wave toward her. "Flick, this is Doyle. He's leasing the old family home on the hill. Captain, may I present my younger sister, Miss Barrow."

"Sugar Hill?" Felicity turned to Captain Doyle.

"That's correct. Your dowry, I understand." He gave her a toothy grin.

"What?" Felicity blinked. Mama had said nothing about Sugar Hill being a part of her dowry. Was the family trying to sweeten the deal or had something happened to her settlement money? She thought of Femy and stiffened.

Captain Doyle gave her a forced smile and then an exaggerated bow. "We are properly introduced at last. Feel better?"

Forgetting about money, Felicity couldn't help but examine the captain's twisted breeches, bare shins, and feet. Feeling twisty inside herself, she jerked her gaze back up and found color on his cheeks as if he was actually abashed. "Proper, indeed," she muttered, wondering if Femy had ever been introduced in her dressing gown to a man half-dressed and half as roguishly striking.

He raised a brow as if hearing her thoughts but dismissed her with, "There was a letter." He left the room, and Fitz stumbled into a chair to sit down. Felicity strode around the table to his side. "What were you thinking?" she hissed. "We are two strangers in the same house and nearly immodest."

He flapped a hand at her. "This is not London, Flick."

"Even in the Indies, I cannot be seen unchaperoned or half-dressed with a man I do not know. He's practically naked."

Fitz crooked his head up at her. "I assure you that is not even

close, and why should that bother you? You've enough brothers to be unsurprised."

She stamped her foot. "He's not my brother."

"Don't put on airs, Flick. You know him well enough. He saved your life despite you smashing his nose, and he took no offense and promised not to spread gossip. We owe him our thanks."

"You still could have informed me before I left my room."

"I was asleep," Fitz growled.

"Passed out more like it. Do you even remember coming home?"

He sighed with surrender, and it made Felicity feel like a shrewish fishwife.

"We played cards most the night then Marsh arrived, and we had some refreshment while engaging at great length about land in the Indies, and pirates and privateers."

"And you had to bring one home?" Felicity groused.

Her brother grunted. "Now, Flick, I should warn you I often end up with an officer on my settle or seaman passed out in the courtyard. Have to keep them out of trouble, you know."

Felicity wagged her chin in surprise. "That will never do, brother, not as long as I am here. Who's to keep you out of trouble?"

"You are, my dear," Fitz grinned. It was lopsided. Felicity clucked her tongue in disgust, but before she could give him a hard pinch on the arm, Captain Doyle clomped back into the room. He wore tall cavalier boots now and had put on a coat. "Here." He held out a letter sealed with a small drip of wax.

Felicity eyed it. He waved it in the air. "It's from Mrs. Packwood. I inquired into her wellbeing as well as the health of her husband, and informed her that you had been rescued and carried safely to Basseterre."

Forgetting her annoyance, Felicity cried, "Why, from Mrs. Packwood? I do declare. That is very kind of you." It was kind of him. The thoughtfulness touched her. She leaned across the table and accepted it.

"Nothing more than my duty."

Felicity flicked her gaze up to the ceiling and back. "I thank you, sir." She found him staring at her intently. "What?"

"I just wondered for which you were thanking me."

"Which? For the letter."

"And for the rescue?"

Eyeing him without mentioning his behavior, Felicity said, "And

for rescuing me. In a manner of speaking."

He wrenched his mouth as if unsatisfied but gave her a slight bow. "There now. Properly thanked and introduced. I daresay I can go back to sea with my crew, cutlass, and a clear conscience."

"At last." Felicity told herself she was happy the man who had tackled her aboard the *Anguille*, pushed her into a balcony railing, and interrupted her breakfast with his shirt hanging open from his burly shoulders was finally going to leave her alone. At least he had not spread any rumors about their intimate contact. She had the Barrow reputation to protect and a husband to find.

"Speaking of cutlasses, Flick, you did mention you should brush up on your swordsmanship," said Fitz, lifting his head from the table where he'd rested it.

Felicity swung her gaze back to her brother and found him staring at her. "I think we should put the past behind us," she said in a stiff tone. She decided not to point out that she'd used a chair to take on Captain Doyle, not a blade, and he didn't need to know she asked for lessons.

Fitz flopped his head back and stared at Captain Doyle whose eyes had rounded with apparent concern. "You spar with me and give ol' Coker lessons. Why don't you tutor my sister? I've taught her all I know."

The captain gave a dry laugh as if thinking this humorous, and Felicity blurted, "I don't need lessons!" Fitz looked back and forth at them in confusion. "You asked for them, Flick, and he's a better instructor than me."

Breath hovering in her throat, Felicity scrambled for another excuse. Mama would never approve, and regardless of what St. Christopher society thought, she did not approve either. Should it be found out...

"Very well," said Captain Doyle with a shrug. "I suppose a little off my rent would be a fair exchange."

"Done," said Fitz, and he plopped his head back down onto his arms.

Felicity blew out a breath of frustration. "Don't I have any say?"

The captain examined her again, and she flushed as she remembered her state of dress. "It's your choice, Miss Barrow, but I warn you that a chair will not always do."

Fitz gave a muffled laugh. Felicity narrowed her eyes. She did need lessons, she just preferred them to be from her brother. "Very

well," she relented, "but only in our garden, and you mustn't tell anyone."

Captain Doyle's lip coiled in a small smile. "Your secret is safe with me, Miss Barrow. No one shall ever know you can take care of yourself."

Could she take care of herself? She hadn't done so well thus far. Pursing her lips, Felicity brushed past him trying not to absorb the pleasant warmth radiating from his body along with the comforting fragrances of faint soap and tobacco. It made her want to stop, close her eyes, and take a deep breath. "You may let yourself out since you let yourself in," she directed like the lady of the manor then took herself up the stairs to the privacy of her chambers. Mrs. Harris would have to carry up the rest of her breakfast after all.



Chapter Five



Thomas could not depart Basseterre fast enough. He almost fell to his knees in gratitude when the weather gauge promised fair sailing. Distracted and concerned, it seemed every which way he turned were reminders that Sugar Hill was still in the Barrow name. It was now a dowry, and it would remain so despite his hopes to re-acquire it and watch it burn.

He no sooner crept out of port than the canvas swelled and snapped, and the *Defiant* flew off across waves as sapphire blue as a crown jewel. The crew relaxed into their routines, but Thomas remained at the helm staring through the horizon. His hopes to personally destroy Sugar Hill had been dashed, ironically, by the brother of the chit he'd worried would insist he marry her. Even knowing there had been a misunderstanding and tussle of some sort, Fitz had not come near to insisting his sister be wed besides a little joking offer.

It was a grey area for Thomas as he was not one to flirt with young ladies or tempt them into trouble. He had no patience for that ilk, but he would not marry. Could not. Even though Miss Barrow was becoming and well, different, from most of the women he knew.

The *Defiant* bobbed its heavy chin forward as the waves began to rise and fall with more enthusiasm. Miss Barrow. Beautiful but dangerously defensive. Bright, he suspected, but confused. She was overwrought with anxiety for everything proper yet reclined in her dressing gown in a sunny breakfast room like a jade-eyed goddess. Even then, she'd displayed a measure of wit and cheek. Little seemed to incapacitate her, and he wondered if her shock and prudishness were all an act—or a self-imposed obligation to behave in a certain way she thought was expected.

The ship bounced over a rolling wave, and Thomas almost lost

his footing. Dash it all. Could he not stop thinking about her? Perhaps she did not know she didn't believe her own airs. He licked salt from his bottom lip and squinted toward the horizon. "Ship, ho!" cried the spotter, dousing the embers of the lady's persistent presence from his mind.

Thomas strode to the foremast staring hard at the horizon to make out a flag. Here was life. A purpose. It was better to hunt down malingering foreign merchants, pirates, and monsters like his father than worry about Sugar Hill—or the sister of Fitz Barrow.



JUST AS FITZ BEGAN to pack his trunk, an invitation arrived from Mr. Marsh to dine with him at a well-established inn on Fort Street before he returned to the far side of the island. It was seemly enough as far as tasteful establishments went, but Felicity was surprised to be invited, too, as it was not Mr. Marsh's home.

Fitz did not mind that she'd been included. He was always happy to be provided a gratuitous meal. He'd spent several hours since the concert expounding the Marsh family history in the Indies which was sparse thanks in part to overseers. Despite that, Felicity was assured his properties in York and London were to be admired and assets Mama and Edward would approve of as well. Whether or not they would approve of her dining with gentlemen at an inn when she was not traveling, she did not know, but she suspected if it led to an attachment they would look the other way.

Smoothing down her skirts, Felicity waited patiently behind Fitz just inside the door of the Twelve Doves, until he offered an arm, and they joined Mr. Marsh at a table in a private parlor with unlit candles. He jumped up to pull out her chair like a footman, brushing back the proprietor. Fitz sat between them leaving them face to face.

"Miss Barrow, don't you gleam in the sunshine?"

She smiled at his compliment. It was prettier than many of the others she'd received before. "Thank you, Mr. Marsh, and what a fine cravat. I do wish my brother had a valet to help him."

"I'd be happy to loan mine," chuckled Mr. Marsh. He dipped his chin at the establishment owner's wife who scurried by with a pitcher. "I've already ordered," he informed them, "and it will be out shortly."

"Do you dine here often?" wondered Fitz, looking about.

"I keep a room when I am in town," Mr. Marsh explained. "The taverns get so loud they give me headaches." He smiled at Fitz. "More your set, I'm afraid."

Unoffended, Fitz grinned. "If you mean gentlemen of the salty sort, I suppose I must agree. I've never stayed at the Twelve Doves but do admire the place."

"It's similar to the accommodations I enjoy at Marsh Winds." Mr. Marsh shifted his gaze to Felicity. "Have you toured the island?"

"Not quite yet, sir."

"I have taken her to the market and the Cokers' concert, too," Fitz informed him.

"Don't you have a plantation in the hills?" wondered Mr. Marsh.

"You do know Sugar Hill is leased," said Fitz.

"Yes, I heard," admitted Mr. Marsh, "to the privateer."

"Captain Doyle, yes." Fitz glanced at Felicity sorrowfully. "I confess I have not taken Flick, er, I mean Miss Barrow, up to Sugar Hill to see the land. Our grandfather purchased it from the Doyle family a long time ago."

"I suppose Captain Doyle hopes to have it in the family again what with memories and all. Though from what I've seen of it, the land is overgrown and the house in shambles," shrugged Mr. Marsh. "Your family did little with it. "

Felicity felt her cheeks warm with mild apprehension. It did not seem appropriate to explain to Mr. Marsh that her father had visited Sugar Hill and found sugar production unpleasant to his taste. Whatever he had experienced, he'd never had any pride in the property and spoke little of it.

As if hearing her thoughts, Fitz said, "There was an overseer for a time, but he took advantage of the family since we lived across the sea. However, it still has a great deal of potential in the right hands."

"Oh?" Mr. Marsh inclined his head. "What will the Barrows do with it, I wonder? Land is a prime commodity in St. Christopher these days. Will you sell it after all?"

"Well," announced Fitz as if he'd just thought of it, "it is my sister's dowry, you see. When she marries, Sugar Hill will go to her husband."

Mr. Marsh raised a brow in interest. Felicity's cheeks caught fire. Introductions at dinners and balls her first season had not discomfited her as much as this exchange. She gave Mr. Marsh a

meek smile.

"A beautiful lady, a beautiful island. I'm sure your progeny will be most blessed," he promised her.

Their supper was served, and Felicity turned to her plate for something to do other than look like a willing mare. The sky outside turned violet, and candles were lit around the room.

"I happen to be available this week and after next," she heard Mr. Marsh say to her brother. She returned her attention to the table and found Fitz staring at her with a polite question in his eye. He dipped his chin as if needing to urge her on. "I will not be at home, but my sister will be there with our cookmaid."

"A companion of sorts?" Mr. Marsh guessed with interest.

Felicity tried not to feel sheepish that she had no mama, no elder sister, nor a patroness to squire her about the island.

"That is right," Fitz replied.

"I must introduce you to Mrs. Coker," Mr. Marsh thought aloud.

Felicity set down her spoon. "The hostess of the concert? We were introduced after the program. I do look forward to becoming more acquainted with her."

"Until then, I would be happy to escort you about Basseterre so that you may get out and see the town."

Felicity smiled in agreement. "That sounds lovely. I must thank you, sir. I'd be happy to go."

And she was happy to go. How very kind, she thought, to finally have someone interested in creating diversions for her. What with Mama not about, and Fitz consumed by his new rank, she was trying to grow used to making her own plans rather than someone else doing it for her. Being almost a spinster was not quite so bad.

After the food and conversation waned, Mr. Marsh escorted them out to a hackney and gave Felicity a lingering look before walking away. Her heart lifted at his chivalry, but Fitz only chuckled under his breath and threw his head back to whistle a jaunty tune she did not know.

Felicity peeked her head out and gazed at low-slung stars already twinkling in the lavender sky as they rattled through the streets. Dinner at the Twelve Doves had been a relaxing and enjoyable affair, much easier than dinners she'd attended in the past. It appeared the Barrow family tragedy had not yet reached Basseterre, and Mr. Marsh, with a great house in York and holdings in the Indies, had taken a benevolent interest in her. She could only

hope it would develop into something more.



THOMAS CAPTURED A SMALL schooner of Dutch pirates on Fishbone Cay who were waiting for their superiors to pick up their share of the loot. The boat was in better condition than the men. They seemed harmless enough, more pickpockets and thieves than bloodthirsty murderers, so the crew of the *Defiant* relieved them of their vessel and barrels of rum. With two small prizes in two weeks, and another small ship to turn over to authorities, Thomas set his course for Basseterre. They hailed a man-o'-war on the waterways home, and the tide carried them in before the moon emerged in the sky.

After unloading the cargo, Mr. Edens and a few others sauntered into town with heavy pockets while Thomas wandered the deck for the first watch. He did not spy the *Pelican* and wondered if that meant Miss Barrow was alone. Besides town, she had not seen much else of the island to his knowledge, and he thought a tour would not be out of order even if it was to see her family's old plantation house. She would be disappointed, he was sure. What woman would want to live in such a cursed place?

The next morning, he retrieved a horse from his usual boy and trotted through the market and then into the hills toward his lodgings. Sugar Hill. The main house perched on an incline overlooking a sloping, empty yard, the decaying boiling house, and an old windmill. Weeds and vines had overtaken the plantation's production sites while weather and vermin had invaded what remained of the main house.

He slipped along the well-worn path to the main house. It was a one-story dwelling built of timber and wooden shingles that rested on a tall stone foundation. There was a row of square windows and a long porch framed by fretwork. What was left of the paint curled up like frayed ribbons, and the roof sagged with old storm debris.

Thomas guided the horse around to the modest stone stable and gave him a bucket of water then strode through the overgrown kitchen garden to the back door. Inside, he pawed through a forlorn pantry and found nothing but a bug-ridden sack of rice. Disgusted, he ambled to the library that he'd turned into his study.

Papa had never used it as such. He'd sat inside and drank, of course, but most of his nefarious business had been conducted on

the grounds from what Thomas could remember. He'd been eight years old when his father sold the land. They'd moved to a small house on the outskirts of Basseterre with a near-level view of the sandy coastline. There, he'd studied and dodged his father's hand while bringing back tree fruits and nuts down from the hills for trading and secreting the money to his mama.

She had never been happy at Sugar Hill, not unless she and Thomas were alone and singing, reading, or taking long walks through the damp forest. On the outskirts of town near the beaches, her sadness had hung over the near-empty house until he thought he would choke. One by one, the servants were traded or let go, then she died, and Thomas was left with nothing but a cold father with gout and a horrid temper, so he signed on with the Navy as soon as he was able to escape.

Their marriage, as far as Thomas was concerned, was proof it was captivity for both parties and misery for at least one. *Don't you ever raise your hand to a lady,* Mama would whisper when he would point out her bruises. *Don't you ever settle with a miss and make her miserable*, she'd warn. Mama had been strong but weak, broken but whole, indomitable—until they went a week without a real meal, and Papa had been away doing something with someone they did not speak of. And then, one day with the tide, she was gone.

A garbled noise from outside caught Thomas by surprise, and with heart pounding, he closed his ledger and rose to his feet. It sounded like ghostly voices... There it was again. He walked to the window and unlatched a solid shutter, pushing it out of the way. There were people on the grounds. He squinted.

On the crest of the cane fields among the overgrown bushes, stood a man wearing a grey beaver hat and two women in walking dresses. One woman was in white muslin up to her neck with a straw bergère on top of her head. A long lavender ribbon fluttered from her chin like a pennant on the wind. Hoping it was not a ghostly mirage of his parents, Thomas grunted in annoyance and clomped out of the room with an old bicorn in hand. He strode out the arched front door, across the yard, and closed the distance to the edge of the field not allowing himself to slow down even when the couple spied him coming and linked arms in self-defense.

He could not believe it when he recognized Mr. Marsh, and standing to the shoulder of the heron of a man, Miss Barrow. Her sea glass eyes shined from beneath the brim of her hat while her

smooth cheeks were flushed almost scarlet. Was it the heat or pleasure in her escort? His heart shuddered, and for some reason, his gut knotted.

"Miss Barrow," he blurted, forgetting his consternation, and then remembering her chaperone standing several steps away, added, "Mrs. Harris."

"Captain Doyle." Mr. Marsh bowed, ignoring that he'd been forgotten. "You must forgive us. Miss Barrow reminded me you are leasing the old place, and since it is her family property after all, I did not think it unseemly to take a look about since we are exploring."

"Exploring?" Thomas repeated. Miss Barrow's laugh had sounded like she was having a good time. He blinked in the bright sun and saw she was watching him. "Isn't your brother away?"

Marsh coughed. "I assure you, Mrs. Harris looks after her only too well."

"And we are not too far from town," chimed in Mrs. Harris as if worried she had done something wrong.

Miss Barrow widened her eyes in innocence. "It's my fault we've surprised you, Captain Doyle. I wanted to see the house," she explained. "I did not think you would mind it."

"Well, it is your inheritance after all," Thomas retorted. He wondered at his tone. Yes, it was the Barrow place now. It had once belonged to the Doyles, but now it was the Barrows, and soon, he imagined, it would carry another name, but he would have liked to have shown it to her himself.

He glanced back over his shoulder. "I supposed you would like to see it now. The house?" Thomas suppressed any bitterness in his tone while eyeing Marsh from the corner of his eye. If Marsh were to marry Miss Barrow, would he sell Thomas the land?

Thomas glanced back at the woman in question and found her staring at him with something akin to mortification. "It's not necessary," she assured him. "We never had family actually live here." She pressed her lips together as if trying to decide something. With a heavy exhale, she said, "We did not mean to interfere and should be getting along on our way."

"If you insist," Thomas returned. He found if not for Marsh he would have been disappointed.

The party all smiled and gazed past one another and then at their boots until Miss Barrow looked about as if searching for

something to say. "What a lovely view. You can see for miles and miles." She motioned below. The port lay beneath them, a jumble of rooftops and rigging and then the sea stretched on for leagues. "It's no wonder you love it here," she said to Thomas. "Everything's so green and fresh and surrounded by the sky."

Sugar Hill? He plastered a smile on his face. He didn't love it. He hated it. Mr. Marsh scrutinized the sight as well. "I daresay it is a fine view. Not as natural as one gets of the uncluttered shores below Marsh Winds, but it's not a far ride to town. That would be quite convenient for someone like myself."

"I must say you're right," Thomas pretended to agree. "Are you certain you wouldn't like some refreshment? I'm sure I have... water."

Marsh chuckled. "No, please do not trouble yourself although I'm sure the water is clear and fine being situated so near the ghut. We should be on our way before the sun's overhead and Miss Barrow finds herself too uncomfortable."

"I'm sure Miss Barrow would be just fine," Thomas assured him. "It is early, and this is not the Spanish coast."

Taken aback but only for a moment, Marsh disagreed. "Yes, but it is still a great deal of sun and can rain on a whim." He glanced at the lady at his side. "However, the climate does suit you, Miss Barrow," he complimented her.

She gave a small laugh that sounded nervous and bent at the knee in some semblance of a curtsy of gratitude. "It was good to see you again, Captain Doyle."

Thomas eyed her suspiciously. She acted as if they were hardly acquainted.

"I'll wish you a good day then," Thomas offered with a thick tongue. For a reason he could not fathom, he added, "And I will look forward to seeing you on Wednesday as I promised your brother." He said nothing about fencing lessons and watched her lips purse. Pleased with the stunned silence, he returned to the house without looking back.

Mr. Marsh already held Marsh Winds on the opposite side of the island. He did not need Sugar Hill, too, unless he just wanted more land and perhaps, a house. It would be land he would pass on to an overseer before returning to England, not land that he would live on. Greedy cad.



FELICITY SETTLED IN the parlor with swimming thoughts. She had enjoyed her time with Mr. Marsh the day before until Captain Doyle appeared. Relieved Mr. Marsh did not question her about the captain's supposed intention to call on her, she'd escaped to her room after he departed only to find a letter on her dressing table. Mrs. Harris must have placed it there without her noticing in her excitement to see the hills around Basseterre.

The author of the missive did not excite her. In fact, Felicity was filled with dread and wondered if Mama knew hastily-wed Femy had written. Felicity had tossed the envelope into a hat box and hoped to forget about it. Instead, she obsessed over it all night long. Now, trying to focus on her embroidery, she could not bear it. She felt restless and wanted to go out and have fun and pretend she did not have an older sister.

Life in the Leewards was quite good despite foreboding rumors of storms and floods and earthquakes. Already, she'd met the local vicar, her neighbor three doors down whose husband was a purser, the widower, Mr. Bradshaw, and she had sewn Fitz his first pillow for the parlor as he had none in the sparsely decorated house. There was an unfamiliar sense of freedom living with only a housekeeper, and Felicity found she liked her busy mornings, walks with Mrs. Harris to the market or along the beach, and calls in the early afternoon. She did not feel nearly as anxious about them as she once had with Mama.

She had looked forward to this day for over a week. Mrs. Coker had invited her to tea, and she felt quite excited. There was only the letter to deal with, and how it threatened to dampen her spirits. Glancing at the slant of morning light, Felicity groaned. There was more than enough time to open and read Femy's letter before calls and tea time.

She pursed her lips and decided to stop torturing herself. Would it not be best to get the worry and distraction over with? She set down her sewing and tiptoed upstairs so as not to concern Mrs. Harris. Withdrawing the envelope from the hat box, she moved to the window over the back garden and leaned into the sun. The sight of Femy's penmanship tugged at her heart, and all at once, Felicity missed her fiercely—until she reminded herself what Femy had done.

Dear Flick,

I hope this letter finds you utterly happy and in good health. Sweet and reliable Fitzwilliam wrote hastily after your arrival that your ship was intercepted, but not to fret as you are safe and well. He informed us you were rescued by a valiant captain in the king's service and ferried safely to your new island home.

How very romantic! I imagine he is a tall and gallant fellow with hair as gold as wheat, a hearty laugh, and good teeth. Of course he will be from a most reputable family, but what does it matter as long as you are safe?

I can scarcely imagine your adventures and wait anxiously to hear from you as Fitz is the only family who has written to me at all. Sadly, Lord Barrow and our mama have yet to acknowledge my happy state, or my beautiful husband, who has made me the happiest of all women in the world.

We are happily ensconced, should Mama have not informed you, in a lovely cottage on the corner of the agricultural property of a dowager for whom Peter serves as a footman. If you recall, his grandfather was an esteemed farmer and practically a gentleman. Peter's brother is the groundskeeper, and of course, my beloved works in the great house. They have not asked Peter about me, but he has retained his position after our most passionate nuptials in Scotland, and according to the Dowager, it is an act of charity he must strive to live worthy of. She is kind to me.

As for myself, I am learning to do all sorts of things in the garden behind my little nest. I now sew as well as a mantua maker and keep a half dozen chickens if you can believe it. They don't frighten me at all. It is quite entertaining here, and I can assure you I never grow bored.

Oh dear Sister, please do write soon. Tell me you are not angry and that you miss me so. I shall not have a moment of peace until I know you are content in that place we once pretended to visit with Fitz and the twins and our wooden swords. I have come to suspect the most exciting news and can hardly wait to share it with you once I am certain. How quickly life passes when we are busy and full of joy!

Your devoted Sister,

Mrs. Euphemia Stone



Chapter Six



You cannot imagine my delight when you invited me to tea," Felicity promised, once settled in Mrs. Coker's elegant sitting room. She'd committed to forgetting the letter that had tainted her morning.

"I am happy to have you," the beautiful and petite woman assured her. "We are admirers of your good and courageous brother but had little time to become acquainted at the concert."

"My brother speaks fondly of you both," said Felicity, and it was true. Fitz said Mr. Coker was most honourable and of logical mind, and they both had an affinity for chess and fencing. Mrs. Coker thanked her, and they settled beside a silver dish of tea cakes in a room with walls the color of spring grass.

Not far from the treasury house and other official buildings, the Cokers' home was rather grand compared to the more practical houses on the other side of town. Mr. Coker, Fitz had explained, was a merchant by trade, had done well in the Indies, and now served as an assemblyman. Although he held no title he was held in high esteem, and Felicity suddenly understood why her grandfather had been so ambitious as to try his hand at land ownership beyond the shores of England.

"As much as I appreciate Commander Barrow's recommendation, you and I did not get to converse at the concert other than for his hasty introduction," fluttered Mrs. Coker, "and for that, I will chastise him completely when I see him again."

Felicity accepted a small queen cake as her mouth watered. "Yes, Fitzwilliam is seldom at home with his orders, but I am happy to keep things running smoothly while he is away."

"Why, he is very lucky to have you then, what with his schedule being unpredictable and all," said Mrs. Coker. Her small, almond-shaped eyes beamed with sincerity. "I do wonder why he does not

marry since he took a house, but I see he only missed his dear sister and wanted a place where you would be comfortable."

Felicity beamed at the compliment, but her insides clenched. Fitz had written her faithfully, had promised he missed her above all of their other siblings, but it had taken Femy's shameful deed to make him invite her to come live with him, and it was at his older brother and mama's insistence no doubt.

"He did not have to do it, and I am happy to be here. It's been quite the adventure." The words left Felicity's lips before she realized what she was saying. Traveling without family was one thing; being kidnapped by pirates was quite another. She made it sound like it was nothing at all. Her face heated, but perhaps her elegant hostess did not know. Surely she would not have invited her to tea; and besides, Captain Doyle had promised to keep their most improper first meeting to himself.

Mrs. Coker leaned forward, a friendly smile softening her lips. "So I have heard. Your merchantman was attacked, I understand. You barely escaped with your life?"

Aghast, Felicity scrambled for something to say, but Mrs. Coker patted her knee. "Now, now, don't fret. I have it on good authority the *Defiant* arrived just in time."

"Do you?" wondered Felicity grimly. "Yes, I was kidnapped, but only for a few hours, and then I was rescued and brought here." She grimaced. "I should not wonder that it all got out." And there it was. Captain Doyle had broken his promise. A flame of indignation lit the back of her mind.

"Oh, dear, you mustn't worry about that. It was terrible to be sure, but one cannot control the circumstances of life in the Indies any more than the weather. I know of no one who isn't happy and relieved you are safe and well. As I said, your brother is greatly admired here."

"I'm happy to hear that. He is a good man." More than Doyle to be sure.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Coker. "Honest and fair and fearless, too, and of such a cheerful nature." She paused. "Which brings me back to my lamentations that he has not chosen a wife. I have introduced him to several of my friends."

"We Barrows are not known to rush into marriage," Felicity stammered. *Except for one of us.* She cleared her throat. "None of my brothers have settled; my mama was four and twenty." Without

warning, Femy seemed to appear in the room and hover beside the tea table, and Felicity squeezed the fragile handle of her teacup. Yes, she had a sister who had wed, but there was no point in mentioning that. Let it stay in London where it belonged.

A resounding clash of steel echoed through the house, and Felicity glanced at Mrs. Coker in mild alarm. A gushing stream of distant laughter followed. The lady raised her eyes heavenward and exhaled. "Oh, those, two," she grumbled then raised her slender lip in a half-smile. "I apologize, Miss Barrow, my husband is having his lessons."

"Oh?"

"Fencing. He fancies himself a swashbuckling mariner when he forgets politicking is his profession."

"Oh, I see." Felicity relaxed. "What great fun." Then she remembered with dismay who tutored Mr. Coker.

"Do you know how to handle a weapon, Miss Barrow?"

"Why, no, of course not." Felicity covered a small cough. "I mean, not very well." She felt her cheeks redden with dread. Captain Doyle was here and happy to tell all her truths. "Maybe a little."

Mrs. Coker reared back in surprise. "With all of your brothers? Six, I believe?"

"Four, madam," Felicity admitted.

"Why, it's a wonder with so many boys romping through the house you did not pick up some of it. Shame on Commander Barrow, I should speak to him at once. One cannot live in the Indies and expect to be under a man's protection all of the time, even with a husband." She smirked. "My father was a military man, you see, and I had a tutor from a very young age until he became comfortable enough to teach me himself."

"You fence?" Felicity wondered. It was so bold and modern.

"I don't make a public display of it," admitted Mrs. Coker, "as it offends the sensibilities of some, but I certainly won't back down from a challenge."

"How admirable," said Felicity. While Mrs. Coker, with her faint French accent and fashionable attire, was fascinating all on her own, her admission that she would not hesitate to wield a weapon to protect herself impressed Felicity the most. She knew of women, even ladies of standing, rumored to be able to lunge with the best of them, stays and skirts and all, but it was not something conversed

about except in whispers. Mama said it was primal and masculine and not something a lady should be about.

"How did you fare with the corsairs so well?" wondered Mrs. Coker, turning the conversation back Felicity's way.

"Why, I - I had no choice, you see, so I was agreeable."

"Agreeable?" repeated the lady with an echo of disappointment. "I dare say you must find ways to be much less agreeable," she chided her. "Perhaps you should join my lessons if you need polishing and have the time."

Felicity clasped her hands in her lap and looked down. Mama certainly would not approve of her taking fencing lessons in Basseterre. She had complained at Fitz's and Edward's lessons to their sisters across the back lawn of the house for years. "I'm not sure my brother would approve," Felicity stammered, although Fitz had already taken it upon himself to arrange it.

"Approve? Your brother once mentioned to us he would teach you himself if he could not find a tutor," Mrs. Coker exclaimed, "but since he is not about, come with me to the courtyard. We will engage my husband's instructor for half an hour."

The cake in Felicity's stomach soured, but the woman rose in a rustle of silks, and expected to follow, Felicity hopped to her feet. Mrs. Harris had elected not to accompany her, walking her only as far as the Cokers' front gate, then waving, she'd disappeared down the cobblestones to meet a friend at the millinery shop.

It was early yet, so Felicity had no choice but to follow Mrs. Coker through a wide hall with polished floors. It led under a steep, polished staircase past a room that smelled of flowers then to a door to a wide courtyard paved with brick.

The courtyard was enclosed by a soaring wall smothered in blooming bougainvillea. Coconut trees, heavy with giant hairy seeds, stood at even intervals, and exotic bushes lined pebble and shell-strewn walking paths. It looked like a tropical Eden.

There was another burst of exclamations as two men without frock coats danced across the courtyard with dodges and lunges. Felicity felt her mouth slack. Mrs. Coker folded her arms in amusement and nudged Felicity with her elbow. "My husband," she said with a dip of her chin, "and the reticent yet resolute Captain Doyle whom you already know."

Mr. Coker's long hair was streaked silver and black, and it made him look like a wild thoroughbred. Felicity watched the respected

gentleman, looking very un-assemblyman-like, circle around a garden bench and lunge for Captain Doyle who stumbled back with a quiet chuckle. The captain was not as unkempt as he'd been in the Barrows' breakfast room, but he still looked rather undone in a striped waistcoat and limp cravat.

The assemblyman spied the ladies watching and threw up his hands in surrender to his opponent. "There you are," he called, and Mrs. Coker gave him a small wave. Captain Doyle looked over his shoulder and caught his boot heel. He stumbled backward, landing on his seat. Appalled for him, Felicity could not help but be amazed when both Cokers exploded into laughter. Captain Doyle jumped back up with a frown. He tucked his foil under one arm and smoothed down his drab pantaloons.

"See, darling, look who came to entertain me while you played pirate." Mrs. Coker wove her arm through Felicity's, who tried not to flinch when she mentioned pirates.

The men exchanged glances as they approached. There was a slight sheen of perspiration across Mr. Coker's forehead, and his cheeks glowed ruddy from his exercise. Captain Doyle was hardly out of breath.

"Miss Barrow." Captain Doyle greeted her with a slight bow.

Mrs. Coker nudged Felicity forward. "May I present my husband, Mr. Coker," she said. "Darling, this is *the* Miss Barrow, sister of Commander Barrow. We were briefly introduced at the concert, you recall, and I have invited her to entertain me since she is new here, and I am in want of friends."

Felicity tried to smile at Mr. Coker and pay no attention to the gaping man beside him. They had not spoken since he'd confronted her and Mr. Marsh on his property—or her property. It had flustered her, for some reason, to be out on a carriage ride with Mr. Marsh so soon upon her arrival to St. Christopher, and seeing Captain Doyle had made it worse.

"You? In want of a friend?" teased Mr. Coker to his wife. "You have more friends than I have stockings, darling." He smiled politely at Felicity.

"Not like this," smiled Mrs. Coker. "We both love our breadfruit, like to dance, and must tolerate a great deal of maleness about what with brothers and husbands and the like."

Felicity glanced at Captain Doyle. He was watching her but looked away when she met his eyes. He seemed irritated she was

here although they had been introduced and exchanged conversation outside of challenging one another amidships and behind potted plants. He probably knew by now she wanted to secure a match, which made her feel like a hungry vulture looking for a meal, but it was not true. It was duty. Surely he would understand if she could explain, but she could not. Femy's choices could ruin her chances here just as they had in London.

"Miss Barrow," Mrs. Coker began. "I imagine you are well acquainted as Captain Barrow delivered you to your brother."

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well..."

"We are," chirped Felicity and made herself smile as if they were quite friendly, but not too much, not romantically so.

"I have come for my lessons, Doyle," announced Mrs. Coker. She motioned toward Felicity. "Miss Barrow should watch. I'm afraid she's so far from home she may not have any opportunity to find instruction should she need it."

"I daresay she does not," grumbled Captain Doyle. He glanced at Felicity, and she pursed her lips urging him not to spill any more of their secrets. "I mean," he corrected himself, "I'm sure Commander Barrow would be capable if he could find the time, but since he cannot, it seems I have been appointed to tutor her." He didn't look happy about it.

"That's wonderful news," cajoled Mrs. Coker. "You know Barrow doesn't make his own orders, and there isn't anything improper about a little exercise, even for a lady." She frowned at him, and it made her pretty heart-shaped face droop. "I would think you, of all people, who found her helpless and afraid aboard a pirate ship would encourage lessons of educational self-defense."

"She was not helpless," Captain Doyle countered, and Felicity flushed. Mrs. Coker examined her curiously for a small moment then drew in a breath as if she'd made a decision. She held out her arm for her husband. "You are spent, darling. I shall not take even a moment's practice until you are rested." She turned to take her husband inside. "Captain Doyle," she commanded with an imperial nod, "you must use up the rest of Mr. Coker's lesson time to work with Miss Barrow."

"Oh—" began Felicity as soon as she saw the look of reluctance on the captain's face.

"Now, Miss Barrow," Mrs. Coker wheedled, "did we not just decide that a little self-defense is a great asset for a lady to own?"

Felicity's arguments died on her lips as the woman escorted her husband indoors. She watched them go before facing Captain Doyle who was staring at the ground. Waiting, her cheeks grew warm until he finally looked up. "Well," she began, anxious at the thought of sparring with the man again, "I'm quite sorry to put you out if you find this uncomfortable or unseemly."

"Are you?"

"I had no idea you would be here today. Mrs. Coker invited me to tea, you see."

"Did she?" Captain Doyle's tone echoed suspicion.

Felicity exhaled through her nose. "Yes, she did, and since Fitz is not at home I was happy to accept."

He cocked his head. "No more rides around the island then?" There was something accusatory in his tone.

"I'm quite sorry," Felicity flushed. "We did not mean to invade your privacy. Mr. Marsh wanted to drive us across the island to see his holdings, but Mrs. Harris felt it too far away. I thought you were not at home, and so I suggested Sugar Hill."

"But I was," countered Captain Doyle. "How is the good Mr. Marsh?" There was something rigid about his tone.

"How should I know?" puzzled Felicity. "I saw him at church Sunday last, but we did not have time to converse. I was with my companion, Mrs. Harris."

"Yes," Doyle grumbled, "your housekeeper. Mrs. Harris and I are familiar."

"As are you and I," Felicity insisted, "but if you do not want to spar with me I understand. My mama for one would never approve, although my brothers would laugh. I will take a turn around this courtyard instead. I'm more than willing to have some time alone."

Captain Doyle snorted. "You spend more than enough time alone, I imagine." He held up the foil he'd taken from Mr. Coker by the grip. "I suppose a little lunge and parry exercise would serve you well." He brushed past her, and she followed him to a narrow case open on the ground. "You can't always heave furniture at your enemies, you know," he called back over his shoulder.

"I know," scowled Felicity, although she appreciated the good humor she heard in his tone. "I'm no stranger to dueling with swords," she admitted, "although they were practice foils or made of wood—children's playthings."

"Well," said Captain Doyle, withdrawing an épée from the

collection, "this is not a toy." He held it out. "Here."

Felicity swished over to take it, and the rustling of her skirts reminded her of her state. "Well, this will not do after all, Captain." What was she thinking? She'd absolved to avoid Captain Doyle as much as possible. He'd seen her stricken and unkempt. Fought with her hand to hand. Not to mention, cornered her behind a palm and appeared at her breakfast table improperly attired. She looked down to explain herself. "I cannot practice in such a gown, not to mention my..." She hesitated and reminded herself she was not speaking to a brother.

"Unless you plan on living on this island in nothing but a shift or night dress you might as well get used to defending yourself in petticoats and corsets."

She almost blushed but wrenched her mouth at him instead, ignoring the heat on her face. "Do you speak so plainly to every woman of your acquaintance?"

"I do not," he admitted, pushing the épée into her hand and walking across the courtyard. He readied his stance then beckoned her with a free hand. "We are more than acquainted as you well know, Miss Barrow. Let's see what you can do."

Felicity snatched up her skirts in one hand and stomped across the brick stones, stopping at what she surmised to be her position. See what can she do? If Doyle were Fitz or one of the twins, she'd be merciless. She narrowed her eyes at him then cut her gaze away guessing what his first move might be and how she might surprise him. He burst into laughter.

"Really Miss Barrow, I do see why they call you Flick."

"Why is that?"

"Because of the way you tighten your eyes when you're angry or look away when you have less than polite intentions."

"It's a battle of sorts, Captain Doyle. There is no call for polite intentions."

"Is there not? It's not like there are corsairs about."

Stung, Felicity sucked in a sharp breath but forced her shoulders to relax. "*Pret,*" she called with a lunge forward, hoping he did not expect it. They clashed, and she dodged rather respectfully she felt, then parried. Their scrambling footwork danced back and forth across the courtyard. She was smart enough to sense he was holding back because of her sex so she took advantage of the opportunity.

Spying the uneven bricks where he'd already stumbled, Felicity

maneuvered herself into a corner then circled him. She thrust with all her might. His parry was unexpected then he reached out with a thick arm, swiped her weapon aside, and yanked her by the elbow. Felicity fell forward just as his boot heel caught on the brick, and they tumbled into a pile on the ground.

After a painful *humph,* which sucked the breath out of her momentarily, Felicity raised up with a small gasp and noted the captain had cushioned her fall. Nearly face to face, the moment their eyes met she found herself mesmerized by his dark eyes that were not nearly as black as she'd once thought but a rich brown flecked with mahogany. His gaze deepened, a hooded look, and a hot surge of humiliation coursed through her. She realized she was sprawled across him, and they were connected—arm to arm, leg to leg, and thumping heart to thumping heart. He was very warm and smelled like tangy sunshine and mint. It made her feel dizzy.

"Do you mind?" he hinted in a quiet tone. His words were the knock on the head Felicity needed to be brought to her senses. She abruptly slid off of him onto her knees.

"Of course I mind," she retorted, her pride stung. "That was hardly proper or fair, snatching me by the arm." Mama had never allowed her to wrestle with her brothers, well, once she was out of leading strings, but she could remember a little. She brushed herself off, her gown covered with sandy dust. "I'm sorry," she grumbled, relieved Mr. and Mrs. Coker had stepped inside. "I forget how intentional I become when under fire."

Captain Doyle sat up with a groan and sighed. "I only tripped, Miss Barrow, for the second time in this confounded uneven courtyard, and besides, I was quite distracted."

"Yes, because you were on the defensive."

He rested his arms on his bent knees and studied her with a look of amusement. "I was letting you wear yourself out. You're a bit out of practice, but I can tell you've had some instruction— from Fitz if I may hazard a guess. You have the same timing."

"All of my brothers were a part of my meager education with foils and épées, not to mention chairs," she joked, surprised at the candor that came easily between them when they were alone. She felt prickling sunbeams through her hair and glanced back toward the small table where she'd left her bonnet.

"I should get out of the sun," she worried aloud. "I cannot let myself get spotted or red."

Captain Doyle maneuvered easily up to his feet. "Oh my, no, that would be improper indeed," he baited her.

Felicity sniffed, handed him the weapon, and walked back over for her hat. She tried to pretend the captain was no different than her brothers; any one of them, but he certainly did not feel like one. She tucked her hair back under the brim of her bonnet listening to him cross the pavers behind her and put the weapons away in their storage case.

Too often they found themselves in one another's company, and now they'd toppled into an embrace of sorts. Oh, dear. Captain Doyle did not make her feel friendly or sisterly or whatever else she should feel.

Felicity's cheeks warmed, and she clucked her tongue at herself. He might have been fetching in a rough way, but it was dark and solemn. He was educated and witty enough to hold his own, but he wasn't exactly a duke. His lodgings at Sugar Hill did not hint at any great income despite his career or Fitz's assumptions, either.

She found him standing close behind her as if watching her think. A ribbon of heat unspooled across her chest, but she forced herself to offer a wistful smile. "Well, once again, that was hardly proper, Captain Doyle, but I suppose I must get used to your ways if we're going to live on the same island."

A small smile creased his cheek, and he held out an arm as if reluctant to do so. "You and I are doomed to impropriety," he agreed in a dull tone she suspected was surrender, "but do not fret, I will say nothing about it within earshot of any gentleman, and especially your Mr. Marsh."

Yes, he was right. She must watch herself, but not just with Mr. Marsh. The way he made her feel was downright questionable, too. She gave a careless toss of her head. "Mr. Marsh is not mine," she insisted. "We have just been introduced and are only friends."

"Proper friends, I'm sure," the captain noted.

"Yes, only that." Felicity frowned. "Mrs. Coker knew all about my situation aboard the *Anguille*. You promised you would not tell." Her disappointment in him reared its head.

"Come now, Miss Barrow," Captain Doyle sighed. "I have not spoken a word of it, and I doubt any of my crew take tea with the Cokers."

"Well, they knew." Felicity exhaled, suddenly knowing who else could have mentioned it. "I suppose it was my scoundrel of a

brother."

"I'm sure he meant no ill will. Don't trouble yourself about it, Miss Barrow. Let us join the Cokers for some refreshment before Mrs. Coker comes in search of us with any more ideas."

He offered his arm, and Felicity accepted it, dismissing the thoughts and feelings swirling through her from head to toe. Yes, she must think of Captain Doyle as only a good friend, like Mr. Marsh, but different.



Chapter Seven



Thomas averted his gaze from every bonnet he saw while maneuvering through the crowds at the Nevis docks. He had no desire to draw attention to himself from the females his vanity ofttimes welcomed. Ever since going head to head with foils instead of furniture at the Cokers' house and finishing on his backside twice in one day, he could think of no one else but Miss Barrow every time he saw a pretty face. Even a glimpse of a slim neck or a peek of fair ankle would do it.

Blast it all, he thought to himself. It was just his luck to drop anchor and find Fitz Barrow's ship here. Spotting the *Defiant's* colors, the commander had sent a message at once, and Thomas could not refuse to meet him for a late supper. He wondered if Fitz had news—if his friend had found a husband for Miss Barrow and that he would soon have to vacate Sugar Hill.

"Perhaps it's best," Thomas blustered. Whatever had made him think he should buy back the house where he had been so unhappy? So what if Fitz did have news. Why should he worry?

It would probably be Marsh for Miss Barrow if Miss Sanford did not sway him. He wasn't a rogue, but Thomas found the man spoiled and unsatisfied. His plantation was large and productive. What did he want with another on the other side of the island? Marsh also gambled haphazardly, not too differently than the disreputable Mr. Doyle, and for that, Thomas did not entirely trust him. Catching him squiring Miss Barrow about Sugar Hill like they were already attached had marked him as suspicious, too. Perhaps, Thomas mused, the Marsh family was in need of opportunities like the Barrows. Such was often the case with those riding the coattails of the nobility.

Thomas strode into a dim establishment with a nod at the proprietor who knew him well. Searching the room, he spotted Fitz

in a corner with his back to the wall. A small table allowed no other company except for one. An empty chair waited for him, and Thomas ducked under a dripping chandelier and wound through a crowd of seaman and merchants. "You're early."

"You're late." A pitcher and two tankards sat on the table. Grinning, Fitz cupped one and ran his thumbs over the rim.

Thomas glanced through a set of nearby gritty windows although it'd grown dark. "I believe I'm right on time."

Fitz passed him a drink. "According to my mama, if one is not early, one is late."

"Ah, the great and venerable standards of the indefatigable Lady Barrow," teased Thomas. He thought his friend looked off. "Are you well? How is protection along the coast?"

Fitz leaned forward but caught himself and rested an elbow on the table. "Well, enough. No foreign ships. And you, my friend?" He narrowed his eyes as if genuinely interested, and the motion reminded Thomas of Miss Barrow.

He sat back. He hadn't seen Miss Barrow since sparring with her in the courtyard. It had been some kind of dance, some conversation beyond words and looks, but he wasn't sure what had been said. Worse, he wasn't sure how he felt about it. "We haven't seen real action in a fortnight. A few traders, and one Spanish frigate who claimed to be confused."

"No pirates or corsairs?"

Fitz's question piqued Thomas's interest. Before he could ask why a serving man dropped two platters of steamed fish and rice onto the table with a bowl of limes. "You ordered for me," said Thomas, bemused and pleased. "Did you want something?"

"We may have been boys, but we served in the Navy long enough for me to learn your habits unless you've given up your portable soup."

Thomas chuckled. "A little of it always sets me to rights even if I'm not in the sick-bay." He speared a corner of his fish and found it just right. "Tell me," he wondered between bites, "why did you mention pirates? I have seen none since taking the *Anguille* and shipping the crew to English Harbor."

"Yes, that is my meaning." Fitz's cheerful disposition seemed to darken. He glanced around the room. "I have heard from another officer, a lieutenant changing ships in Basseterre, that a select few of the prisoners from the *Anguille* escaped."

"They weren't hung?"

"Not a half-dozen."

Thomas frowned. "How incompetent," he growled, "and downright foolhardy of the prisoners."

"It's only a matter of time before they're found again," Fitz allowed with a shrug. "They will be arrested when they take up with another crew, but I have concerns. We do not keep a serious watch along our coast. It's just me, really, so I take comfort in knowing you're about."

"As much as I can be," agreed Thomas. "I do like my schedules, but if you think I should stay closer to home for a time I would consider it."

Fitz took a sip of ale with raised shoulders as if indifferent.

Thomas twirled a fork in his hand. "There are French privateers who still resent the Treaty, and it's been over twenty years since the island was returned. I have battled as many as three in my career just to keep my cargo."

"They're downright pirates themselves," muttered Fitz. "I've run two off this past month but did not catch them. I have a feeling."

"What kind of feeling?" wondered Thomas.

"I don't know," Fitz admitted, "but I did grow up with a brother lurking around every corner ready to surprise me. Perhaps it's just suspicion. It seems there is never peace in the Indies and never will be."

Thomas took another bite of fish, and it made his mouth water with satisfaction. This was why he often crossed the narrow channel to Nevis. The smaller crowds, and to be sure, the food at the Blue Tabby. "Perhaps we should look at coordinating our schedules," he suggested, "if you are that concerned."

"Something like it," admitted Fitz, a measure of cheer returning to his countenance.

"It's just my sister, you know. I'm beginning to fret like an old peahen now that I have family to look after." He sighed. "A crew is trouble enough, but Flick... well, this is not Mayfair, and I find myself responsible for her in ways I never expected."

Thomas studied him but looked away before their gazes locked. Fitz could not know that his old shipmate was fascinated by his sister in more ways than one. Besides, Miss Barrow needed a husband, and he had no intention of being a candidate. Mama had taught him that marriages were rarely happy if at all, and as he had

disappointed both his father and her, he wouldn't make a spirited young woman in full bloom grow pale, unhappy, and desolate until she...

"I understand," he murmured.

Fitz shrugged off his grey mood and lifted his mug. "Long live the king."

Thomas chuckled in amusement. King George had never set foot on Nevis, much less St. Christopher. "Long live Farmer George," he toasted.

"And the *Defiant*," Fitz offered.

"How does your sister find the islands?" Thomas wondered. "Shall we toast to her, too? Does she like life in the tropics with her brother off chasing pirates in the *Pelican*?"

A small laugh spurt from between Fitz's lips, and he covered his mouth with his wrist and dabbed at his lip with his sleeve. "Flick came to the Indies against her will. Being taken by corsairs did not relieve her anxieties."

"Ah, yes. She arrived for a proper hunt of her own."

"She is not running from anything, not her own scandal, I mean," furthered Fitz. "She has every intention of returning home as soon as she secures her future."

"There was no future in London?" Thomas wrinkled his forehead. There was more to Miss Barrow than met the eye.

"I have several siblings, you recall."

"That's right." Thomas couldn't keep up with the Barrow brood.

"We have our older married sister, Femy," continued Fitz. "Euphemia was third in line. I suppose Mama was satisfied with an heir, a "spare", and a baby girl, but along came Flick a few years later followed by twins and a baby sister. We were a great deal to manage, and since my father died the whole family seems to be out of sorts."

"I daresay your mother is an indomitable woman after all."

Fitz smiled faintly. "With four sons to manage and three daughters to marry off, she's grown nervous in her older years. She's a loving mother, that much I can say, unless there is as much as a sniff of scandal, and then we are all business. Serious business indeed."

Scandal? Now it was beginning to make sense. Miss Barrow was certainly all business unless you put a foil in her hand, and her determination to win a fight was scandalous indeed. "You told me

your sister, Euphemia, was married."

"Yes, quite late, and er..." Fitz hesitated and looked around the room like he feared someone was listening, "not as expected. She was a bit of a flirt, I admit, but after my papa died... Well, my eldest brother is not the most discreet of gentlemen himself. That is why we must promise Sugar Hill with Flick's hand. There simply are no extra funds for the Barrows at the moment."

Thomas had heard similar stories before. He winced with compassion. "So Miss Barrow pays the price."

"Yes, and she does not really know. Despite her maturity, Flick has not been out long," Fitz explained, "and I'm glad of it. She's a good sister, loyal, brave, and very dependable, but when I left for sea it pained her greatly, and then my father passed. He doted on Flick where our mama did not."

"How sad," Thomas interjected. He could not relate to a doting papa.

"It is," Fitz frowned. "She's always been an admirable miss, but she's become too solemn and serious-minded since entering society. Mama was right to send her away and retire to the country with the twins and Genny, but I know Flick has no intention of staying here forever, and maybe that's best. Besides, who knows where I shall end up?"

"The far side of the world?" Thomas offered, imagining Miss Barrow in East Indian dress.

Blissfully ignorant of Thomas's shocking fancies, Fitz picked up his tankard. "My orders from home are to marry her off quickly to someone of wealth and standing to help the family finances—and reputation. Then we ship her back home if her husband allows it. That part I haven't pointed out to her. She could be stuck here forever."

Thomas tensed his jaw and wondered about Marsh. The man already had a great inheritance in England besides his plantation on the northwest side of St. Christopher. What could he seriously want with Miss Barrow? Did he think she had income, or did he like her because she was the daughter of a peer? "I daresay many a gentleman would want a young wife to stay," mused Thomas although Mr. Marsh said he only planned to stay for a time.

Fitz made a noise of agreement. He pushed the remainder of his food around on his plate with his knife. "Yes," he agreed as if reading Thomas's mind. "Did you know before I left Marsh sought

me out to ask if he might call on her? He has taken her on a ride about Basseterre and suggested a future outing to see his property."

Thomas did know, but simply added, "Interesting." He went back to his food like he was still hungry. "I suppose she will have plenty of opportunities to meet more eligible prospects at dinner parties and the like if Marsh doesn't steal away all of her time."

Fitz gave a careless shrug. "I do not mind if he does if she fancies him. We're on a mission, and the sooner she accomplishes it, the sooner we can relax although I will miss her dreadfully when she goes. In my heart, I – I would like her to stay."

Thomas sat back in his spindly chair, his appetite ruined. "I daresay with her good looks and admirable disposition, whatever transpired within your family will have little influence here." He realized he sounded like he was grumbling and cleared his throat and smiled brightly at his friend. "I predict your sister will be married within the year."

Fitz raised his drink. "To Marsh or whomever."

Thomas forced himself to raise his tankard, too, but he would not say Marsh's name. He could not. His stomach clenched, making him feel hot and unsettled. *The devil take it*, he lamented inside his head, *I cannot be jealous!*



MR. MARSH CALLED AGAIN, a day after Fitz returned home for a short period of shore leave. Felicity found herself running out of polite questions and modest answers after some time. She squeezed her fingers in her lap, staring at her plain muslin gown wondering if she should have worn something brighter. It was the only thing that did not seem to overly enthuse Mr. Marsh. He seemed to like her a great deal.

Ever the proper gentleman, he turned her every word into an opportunity to offer a compliment. Whether it was her embroidery (He had never seen such quality.), overseeing the house and garden (She was the most organized and spirited of all women), or trips to the market with Mrs. Harris (Few others had as much appreciation for fresh air much less her vitality.), there seemed to be nothing in her he found wanting, and she could not help but be pleased if not a tiny bit exhausted.

Mrs. Coker mentioned during their last tea time that the Marshes had a manor outside of York. When Felicity mentioned it, Mr.

Marsh informed her it was in great need of someone to brighten its halls. Felicity's heart pinched at his delicate hint, and she tried not to blush when she imagined herself in a great drawing room.

Of course, the moors in north Yorkshire would not be as pleasant as it was here. As Mr. Marsh described a great hearth tall enough for him to stand in, Felicity couldn't help but consider the long, dark winters far from Worcester without the twins to entertain her or Mama to share fancies and gossip. She brushed away her concern. Surely the moors had a beauty she would admire, too, should she ever see them. The possibility made her innards quiver, but she told herself it would please the family more than anything, and she would be doing her duty to accept Mr. Marsh's attention which she could not fault.

"How your family must miss you, Mr. Marsh," she guessed after he finished his eloquent description. Rays of sunshine outside the shuttered windows had shifted another direction, and Felicity realized it would soon be tea time and wondered if she should ask him to stay.

"Yes, well, as I have said, it is only my mama at home. She insisted I travel and see this business for myself, as I have not been abroad since my father died. My sister, Mary, who is married, likes to stay for weeks on end and visit with her. I am sure," he chuckled, "they are happy to have me out of their way."

"Oh, no, not at all," Felicity smiled, for surely he was just as attentive a son and brother. "Do they write?"

"Yes, why nearly every month, and I am sure to reply to them promptly, you see. They are anxious to be in London for the next season," he explained, "and with things here so well I am sure we will soon be able to redecorate our house in town which will please them both."

Felicity leaned forward. "You mentioned you were looking into expanding," she wondered, thinking of his admiration for Sugar Hill. "Will they visit the Indies?"

"Not Mama," he chuckled. "I'm afraid my mother is not without her afflictions and would not be comfortable with the accommodations a ship offers." He paused and raised his brows at Felicity. "I daresay you are a strong sort to endure the journey so well and live so comfortably in this diminutive cottage without complaint." He smiled. "My mother would quite approve of your vigor. The moors are not without their challenges, you know."

"So I've heard," Felicity allowed. "I'm afraid I have never seen them for myself." She wondered why his mother would approve of her vigor. What would be expected of a future Mrs. Marsh?

"I am open to expanding my holdings here if I find it opportune," Mr. Marsh continued, while looking around the little parlor with his bright blue stare. "All it takes is another overseer to tend to it."

"The sugarcane, you mean," Felicity returned without thinking then raised her eyes to meet his and found them guarded.

"Yes," he admitted. "It takes a great deal of income to maintain an estate both here and at home."

Felicity thought of the enslaved people she had seen around the island then of the country house in Worcester where she had played freely with her brothers and sisters. "Living with Commander Barrow has shown me I can be just as happy with less, and I rather like sharing in the duties of running a home."

"What a very intelligent and frugal young woman, you are," he admired, "and so happy with life's simplicities."

"I'm becoming that way," Felicity admitted. She had come to see that there was more privilege in her life than being a baron's daughter, but putting it into words was difficult.

"Then you are a prize indeed. Your brother is lucky to have you... for as long as he may."

Felicity felt her cheeks warm and dipped her gaze to the floorboards. Mr. Marsh slipped a pocket watch out and gave her a flinching smile. "I have overstayed," he apologized.

"Not at all," Felicity assured him. "I know you have a great deal of business in town, and it was kind of you to call and further our acquaintance." As if in agreement, Fitz wandered into the parlor. He shot a look of inquiry to Felicity to see if he was intruding. She stood.

"See now," she chided her brother, "you have left us alone to write out your orders and now Mr. Marsh must go."

Although it was surely what the three of them expected, Fitz gave a toothy grin. "You must both excuse me. Marsh, if you were on the way to the treasury, I would be happy to accompany you."

Mr. Marsh bowed in agreement then planted himself directly in front of Felicity. He reached for her hand and placed a soft kiss above her knuckles. "I am much obliged to have spent my morning in your company," he promised her. He beamed at her from beneath his neat brows before he straightened. There was something

mischievous about it, and she realized he was flirting.

"I enjoy your company as well," she promised, trying to act natural after his lips dampened her skin. She did enjoy his friendship, but his forwardness caught her off guard.

Sensing her reservation, Fitz cried, "Well, let us be off!" and he gave her a long look as he clapped Mr. Marsh on the back and led him out the door.

Felicity sank back onto the stiff settle staring at the spot where Mr. Marsh had kissed her. He had no intention of staying in St. Christopher once his affairs were set in order, and he appeared to have every intention of wooing her. This meant she might return home soon, and with a husband and great house in the north. It was just as everyone had hoped. Expected. Even Fitz seemed pleased. So why wasn't she?

Chapter Eight

A dinner party at the Cokers home was an anticipated event, what with its established beauty, charming furnishes, and of course, the delightful menus. After greeting Lieutenant Shirley in the front gardens of the great two-storied house, Thomas breezed through the door into the shade of the front hall searching the adjoining receiving room where soft chairs and settles were upholstered in blues and greens. Other guests were gathering. Late afternoon sunbeams brightened the shadows because it was simply too hot to dine earlier in the day. Vented shutters allowed air to circulate as guests greeted or chatted with one another.

Thomas noticed two other politicians who sat on the Leeward Assembly and several successful merchants who traded sugar for tobacco and lumber with the Americans. It seemed many were ashore to see and be seen in Basseterre. In the back of the room near doors that would open to a long table and stylish place settings, he spied Miss Barrow standing beside her brother with her hands clasped.

"Oh, there is the commander now," murmured Lieutenant Shirley stepping up beside him again. "I suppose I have him to thank for this generous invitation."

"Have you been introduced to his sister?" Thomas found himself unable to pull his gaze away from Miss Barrow. She looked unsisterly to him in a white evening gown with a little train he suspected was of silk gauze. A thin, fluttering overlay was embroidered with shining blue leaf clusters that matched the trim on her sleeves. He was certain without standing right before her eyes they'd look as much like West Indies waters as ever.

"I have, yes," the officer confessed after a pause that hinted he had been admiring Miss Barrow, too.

How fair she was Thomas thought to himself. His palms

prickled, and he rested them discreetly on his coat. This is why he had looked forward to coming—to see her again.

"I should say hello," Lieutenant Shirley decided as if hearing Thomas's thoughts.

"I'm sure they will be pleased you are here." It was an honor for the young lieutenant to be singled out by the Cokers, Thomas knew, but he could not bring himself to join him. Not at the moment. If he was going to stare at women, it was probably best not to stare at one who wanted a husband. Besides... He swept the room looking for Marsh and saw the planter had spied the Barrows, too. There. It was just as well. Thomas should not look like a desperate gander running to flock around the pretty goose.

"Thomas?" came a low feminine whisper, and he jerked his head aside.

Mrs. Coker chuckled. "I did not mean to interrupt your wool-gathering," she teased. The lilt of her faint accent hinted that she did. Her gaze followed his former direction of interest, and a smile crept over her face. "I see Miss Barrow has arrived."

"With her brother, yes," remarked Thomas in a bored tone. At least he hoped he sounded bored.

Mrs. Coker tilted her head. "Oh, was it the commander you were admiring?" she chuckled. "I thought you were looking at Miss Barrow the way James looks at apples when we can acquire them."

"I was only admiring her gown." Thomas straightened to stretch his shoulders. His gut pricked a little, much like his palms. "No one looks as divine as you," he smirked.

"Oh, this old thing?" she simpered, looking down at her gleaming silver lamé, but she gave a low laugh in her throat. "Well, then, I am sorry to tell you I have not seated you beside me but next to the new assemblyman's wife. "Oh," she whispered as she turned to go, "and since you are sparring partners with Miss Barrow, I did place her on your other side so you may protect her from any scallywags. What a good thing you admire her gown."

She drifted away without another word. Thomas realized she may have seen too much of his jousting with Miss Barrow in her courtyard the time before, or perhaps his friend's wife had watched too closely when they'd later turned indoors for an exotic mango refreshment. Miss Barrow had easily captivated him with the news of London and descriptions of her family's country house not too far from Mr. Coker's family home where he'd lived as a boy.

Thomas backed up to a wall and watched Marsh speak to Miss Barrow with his hands, flinging them this way and that as he probably rambled on about his plantation. It was all Thomas could do not to scowl. Miss Barrow had made it clear she was not interested in learning about the sugar cultivation process, much less how to distill rum, and she'd hinted of her distaste for the forced labor used in the islands. For that, Thomas respected her, for she knew nothing of what fathers and supervisors and overseers could do. It was a cruel world, and he felt the sudden desire to protect her from knowing it.

He snuck another glimpse of her across the room and wondered if he was mistaken about her opinions. Her cheeks looked rosy, her eyes lit like lamps, and a pleasant, sincere smile curled her slender lips as if pleased to be conversing and not minding with whom. She had no idea she looked like a golden-haired nymph with her sunrise-yellow locks pinned up high.

Little curls dangled to her temples, and he followed them down to her cheekbone then traced the outline of her neck wondering what it would feel like to rest his lips on the fair flesh just beneath her earlobe. She looked up, and his heart flinched. Thomas cut his gaze away as heat rushed to his cheeks. "You're a ridiculous rake," he chided himself and stared at the back of a merchant's bald head instead.

Miss Barrow was nothing more than a charming friend now that their first improper and rather painful meeting was behind them. He'd agreed to give her a little fencing instruction but only once a week when he was ashore. She was young and wanted to return to England at the first chance, and he wasn't looking for an attachment. Her gaze drifted across the room to him again, and he caught her eye and nodded before she smiled and looked away.

Yet, Thomas admitted to himself, he was relieved he would be seated next to her rather than any of the other women here tonight. Interesting and articulate Miss Barrow would make dinner quite tolerable indeed.

FELICITY'S PULSE HOP-skipped when she noticed Captain Doyle across the room, and she let out a quiet breath of surprise at her heart's response. He looked fetching in a dark coat over a golden embroidered waistcoat. It would have caused his eyes to gleam like

moonbeams had he blue ones like Mr. Marsh, nonetheless, his rugged skin glowed and his ochre locks shined darker in a tempting, mysterious way.

She curtsied to Mr. Marsh and assured him she was in good spirits when he joined her circle. He had exciting news about a horse his brother-in-law had purchased and was eager to share it. All the while, persistent thoughts skipped along the edge of Felicity's awareness wondering how she could have ever been afraid of Captain Doyle, and at the same time, emboldened enough to fight a man twice her size who could have easily murdered her and tossed her overboard. She gave her head a small shake. Captain Doyle had saved her despite the confusion and clumsiness of the situation, and he'd made every effort to be a gentleman since discovering she was not some kind of wild Anne Bonny.

Lieutenant Shirley sent her a polite look, and she forced herself to quit thinking about the captain across the room and concentrate on her brother's lieutenant instead.

"Don't you look lovely this evening, Miss Barrow," Lieutenant Shirley said when Mr. Marsh finished his story, but before Felicity could reply, Fitz put a hand on her back and nudged her forward as if she needed to stand nose to nose with his officer. He was quite fond of the lieutenant and knew his family. They were not of nobility, but of good standing, with a wealthy inheritance that Lieutenant Shirley, much like Fitz, was not entitled to.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she beamed. "I am happy to see you tonight. Did all of the *Pelican's* wardroom receive an invitation?"

He looked around as if unsure then returned to her study. "I have only seen Commander Barrow." He smiled faintly. "I'm certain I was only invited because of my connection to him."

Fitz cleared his throat. "You know Miss Sanford well," he suggested in a low voice that was almost a cough. When his subordinate blushed, Felicity replied, "Now, Fitz, leave poor Lieutenant Shirley alone."

She suspected all of her brother's wardroom knew that besides Miss Sanford, his own sister was in want of a respectable match, and that a rambling old plantation on the island would come with the marriage settlement.

"Have you heard about the *Bolster*?" the lieutenant wondered like he needed to change the subject. "She was attacked by pirates not twenty leagues southeast of Nevis." Fitz leaned forward to hear

the ship news. Mr. Marsh angled himself between them, and Felicity gave him a tight smile, hoping her nerves did not show.

"The lieutenant is quite right, Miss Barrow," he assured her with a long look into her eyes. "You are lovely. That is a fine gown, I daresay, and as pretty as Mrs. Coker's, whom I'm sure enlists only the finest modiste in the islands."

"Yes," hummed Felicity, warming with pleasure. "She recommended her to me since there are few mantua-makers on St. Christopher and was a great help in advising me as to what suits me best. I respect her taste."

Mr. Marsh brightened. "What a clever tactic," he observed, "to take the advice of one of the most fashionable ladies in the islands. I hear nothing but compliments about the modiste from the widow Sanford, and the rumors are certainly true." He swung his gaze around their circle. "How do you find the guestlist tonight?"

"I have not met everyone," admitted Felicity.

"Surely that is only a matter of time." Mr. Marsh took her by the elbow. "I'm sure Mrs. Coker intends that you do."

Felicity felt herself shrink, unsure if she was ready for more introductions, but the murmuring voices in the room were interrupted by the tapping of a crystal glass, and dinner was announced. Felicity almost sighed with relief until she realized Mr. Marsh still had her elbow.

"My brother," she began with a nervous laugh.

"Oh, I'm sure neither our hostess nor he will mind," Mr. Marsh assured her just as Fitz looked over as if to take her arm.

He was probably right. Mrs. Coker would have put them together. Felicity felt her nerves tighten again and drew in a breath. She glanced behind her, unable not to look to see where Captain Doyle stood. He had stepped in line behind them, with Miss Sanford attached nervously to his arm.

Felicity opened her mouth to say hello but was drawn forward as Mr. Marsh led her into the dining room behind her brother and Mrs. Sanford. Her apprehension slipped away when she saw that Captain Doyle would be seated beside her. Mr. Marsh, not to be outdone, found his seat just one chair over. With Fitz and the lieutenant across from her, it was quite the company, and Felicity felt herself become warm from the attention, wondering if this was how it had been for Femy. No wonder she had felt so celebrated her first season or two.

Attempting to gather her wits, Felicity felt even more pressure not to slurp her soup or spill a crumb. She could just imagine Mama's sharp eyes. Even the occasional nods down the table from Mrs. Coker made her feel on guard. Suddenly Felicity wanted to be closer to Fitz, so that he might lighten the mood before she became too stiff and uncomfortable.

Mr. Marsh stared and smiled, but she pretended not to see. Instead, she looked to Captain Doyle for conversation as the first course, a white soup, was served. He had said nothing but, "Good evening," when he eased down into the chair beside her.

"You're looking well," Felicity complimented.

"Well I am not splayed out on the bricks in the courtyard yet," he grimaced, but then his cheek pulled as if he wanted to smile.

She chuckled and waited for the signal to pick up her spoon. "I daresay the night is young," she teased.

Captain Doyle snorted under his breath. He leaned closer, bringing a cloud of something pleasant enough to make her want to inhale deeply, a citrus soap, traces of coffee, and perhaps leather, too, from a pair of polished Hessian boots that had replaced his usual knee-high maritime wear. "I do hope you will give me another opportunity to salve my pride," he whispered in a low voice. His warm breath, so close to her ear, sent a quiver down her spine. "To be beaten twice by a Barrow is a shameful thing."

Felicity smiled to herself and indulged in the first course. Between bites, Captain Doyle informed her that he'd sailed to Montserrat and back, stopping on his way out to meet her brother in Nevis.

"Yes, he told me all about it," she admitted. "They have sallied back and forth across the coast for weeks it seems." She glanced towards Fitz. "I'm happy he's home."

"As am I," interjected Mr. Marsh. "Have you thought about what part of St. Christopher you would like to see next?" This made it no secret he'd engaged her for another ride around the island. Several guests around the table quieted to pay attention. Felicity felt her face grow warm.

"I – I am not sure."

"Perhaps Frigate Bay," suggested Doyle from her other side, "where Admiral Hood saved the island."

Mr. Marsh brightened. "Oh, yes, that's a story although I do not know it well. It's a lovely place, or perhaps Bluff Point with the

lovely view of the bay."

Felicity couldn't help but feel agreeable speaking of views and bays. "I would look forward to either, Mr. Marsh. I daresay I haven't had a good vantage point since overlooking the sea at Sugar Hill."

Doyle made a faint noise under his breath, and Felicity wondered at it. Did he agree his current lodgings were best suited for a view, or was he irritated she had mentioned it? She looked down at her plate, the menu providing a bounty of frittered fishes and meat steaks. The captain's family had once owned the place before selling it to the Barrows. Did he stay there because it felt like home? She felt a stab of guilt as if she had usurped his childhood.

"Are you looking forward to the season's ball at the customs house? I understand they have one every year and many from all around the islands come, sometimes even the governor." Mr. Marsh diverted her attention again, and Felicity looked up, grateful for a change of subject.

"I am, quite. I haven't been to a ball since my... well, since I left London," she amended. She thought so often of Femy she'd nearly uttered her name! It was the letter. Why had she read it? What an explanation that would be, to tell them all why she'd left London. Mama would swoon if she heard it.

"It's quite the spectacle," Mr. Marsh continued, "music and dancing and games for days."

"It is indeed, and so many fine folk attend," Mrs. Sanford agreed, glancing at her daughter as if the ball was in celebration of her.

"It sounds like great fun." Felicity peered along the table and smiled at the younger Miss Sanford. The girl gave her a shy nod then looked away as if she couldn't bear any more attention. Felicity understood. She was sure she appeared much like Miss Sanford when her mama was at her side.

"Will you be singing tonight?" queried Mrs. Sanford.

"I play the pianoforte," Felicity replied, "although I am quite out of practice, but Mrs. Coker was kind enough to allow me to prepare on her instrument."

"I look forward to that," Mr. Marsh assured her.

"As do I," murmured Doyle from beside her.

Felicity gave him a sideways glance. "You sound rather unconvinced," she accused.

He concentrated on using his fork. "I know what you can do with a chair so I'm curious about a pianoforte."

A surprised laugh spurted out, and mildly discomfited, Felicity covered her lips with a table napkin. She noticed Marsh watching her curiously.

"Whom do you play?" he wondered.

"Haydn and Mozart," she answered, feeling somewhat shy. "I'm sorry I do not sing well," she confessed, "but I know 'tis so and will not be begged into it.

"Miss Sanford sings quite well," interjected the girl's mother, "and she will sing tonight."

"I can hardly wait," Felicity promised, and sent Miss Sanford another smile, but the girl was studying the flames on the table's silver candelabra.

"If you play as well as you converse and care for your good brother then I am sure you are more than proficient," Mr. Marsh insisted.

Felicity nearly shook her head. "I am hardly that, but I enjoy it."

"Then the real question," decided Mr. Marsh, "is whether or not you can dance. I daresay you can tell everything about one's character by how he or she dances."

"One's training and talent at least," Felicity agreed.

"Even a dastard can dance," Captain Doyle countered quietly, but he looked down the table making Felicity wonder if she'd imagined what she heard.

"What's your favorite dance, Miss Barrow?" Mr. Marsh leaned close, and Felicity worried he would stain his clothes with his plate.

"I've never been asked that before, I..." Felicity thought hard. "I must say I quite love the gavotte although I do adore a country dance."

"Then I am in luck," Mr. Marsh beamed. "I do find the gavotte most elegant." He picked up his glass as if he would drink, but it hung in the air. "The honor of having your first dance at the ball would be an honor for any gentleman."

He did not quite ask, but at his hint, heads turned, and Felicity's cheeks blazed like sunshine. As everyone stared, she flitted a peek across the table at Fitz. His eyes flickered with encouragement. He approved, it seemed, of matchmaking and pairing off even over the roasted pork.

"Now, now," called Mrs. Coker. "Let us not get ahead of ourselves. We have a lovely evening planned tonight. Whist, of course, in the drawing room upstairs, and once you are too tired to

concentrate, we will all have some rest and enjoy fine music and song."

A few of the ladies applauded quietly. Felicity willed her cheeks to cool. She suddenly knew who would sit at her table for cards, and she wished she had begged Fitz to play with her before the evening began. Should she spend all of her time with Mr. Marsh, they might appear very much attached, practically decided. As much as she liked him, she was not in *that* much of a hurry, no matter what Femy had done.

Lieutenant Shirley entertained the party with a brave story about Fitz chasing away the last strange ship to loiter in their waters during dessert, and it left little opportunity to speak any further to those seated around her. Really, Felicity thought, she did not mind. She was a little tired, thinking so hard and planning for every little thing she should say and do. She'd be relieved when her turn at the pianoforte was finished.

Captain Doyle only spoke once during dessert, asking if she liked the coconut custard, which she assured him she did a great deal. "I don't know how I have ever done without it," she admitted and stopped herself from licking her spoon. "The twins would enjoy it very much."

After the ladies stood and filed upstairs to leave the men to their port, Felicity stole away to refresh herself as her friends continued into the drawing room. She found a small library where two wide doors opened to a second story veranda that stretched the length of the front of the house. Enchanted, she stepped onto the covered porch for a breath of air, hoping she would not interrupt any gentleman who'd snuck away to smoke alone.

The night sky glimmered with stars, and the near-full moon smiled from beneath the hem of a loitering cloud. Felicity inhaled the perfumed air and concentrated on the sounds of nightlife. It was a curious song, but one she'd grown accustomed to and found rather pleasing. She thought it a much better accompaniment than rattling carts, irritated horses, and wagon wheels. The Indies truly was a wonderful place, and this clear, friend-filled night was a gift so why did she feel so unsettled? Nerves. That was it. That was why her gut clenched every time she saw Mr. Marsh. His intentions, now quite clear, made her a bundle of unease.

Why? He was handsome, kind, and yes, he was rich. Things were moving along just as they should. Edward would be pleased,

and Mama proud. Felicity had never actually been pursued before, not this seriously and certainly not for this long. She would be on her way back to England in no time.

A cloak of reassurance settled across her shoulders, and she exhaled. Voices from the nearby drawing room swirled around her and made her wistful for a dance. She was quite looking forward to the ball since her last tea with Mrs. Coker. The lady had spoken about how exquisitely romantic it would be, and Captain Doyle had said he would attend. She would at least know Mr. Marsh and the captain.

Felicity leaned over the fretwork and peered into the front garden. Captain Doyle had said nothing after Mr. Marsh's hint; likely he did not care with whom she danced. She touched her lips together and admitted the sinking of her heart a fathom or two was disappointment. Captain Doyle probably wouldn't even dance. He seemed to be as agreeable as Fitz when it came to Mr. Marsh's attentions to her, and that was probably best, although...

Felicity squeezed the rail, remembering when Captain Doyle had bumped into her behind the potted palm at the concert. She'd had a completely inappropriate reaction finding him so close to her in the shadows. Would she have felt the same if it had been Mr. Marsh?

She worried her lip. Where Mr. Marsh was fetching, she decided, Captain Doyle was striking. Mr. Marsh was charming and complimentary, but the captain was never more than polite and, well, frank, although he was not above issuing a bit of praise now and then. Mr. Marsh knew a great many people on the island, but Captain Doyle appeared to have only close, trusted friends and confidants like the Cokers. The couple held Captain Doyle in high regard even if he lived in a dilapidated old plantation house that had once belonged to her papa.

How darling were James and Lisette Coker! Mr. Coker doted on his wife, and never tightened his tone or scolded her as some husbands were apt to do even if they pretended to be teasing. His wife was as lovely as an onyx ring, and she adored him. They loved each other and seemed to enjoy one another's company. There was a sweetness between them that anyone could see and appreciate.

Felicity found the moon again and wondered if Papa missed her and knew everything that was happening. Life and London seemed far away, like a door was beginning to close. Her throat tightened. "I don't think I can perform anymore tonight," she murmured to the

sky.

"Then don't. You already spend a great deal of your time performing."

Felicity sucked in a sharp breath before recognizing who stood in the shadows behind her. She melted with relief. It was only Captain Doyle, and she realized she preferred it be him over anyone else, for he would not share what he'd overheard. He was, if anything, discreet and trustworthy. It was Fitz who rambled too much.

Captain Doyle stepped out of the shadows and joined her on the veranda. A rush of warm pleasure sent ripples of gooseflesh down her arms, but Felicity told herself it was for his company, not his smooth voice or broad shoulders straining beneath his coat. He'd just surprised her was all. Not that she minded. For the moment, the door to all of her uncertainties clicked shut.



Chapter Nine



They are forming teams for whist," Thomas warned when he joined Miss Barrow in the moonlight. She looked rather angelic. He would not admit he had sought out her company because he preferred it to boasting over strong drink. Later, after music and attending to the ladies, it would naturally turn to gambling and other poor choices. Someone, he supposed, would go home behind closed doors and act much like his father would. "If you do not come down I will be paired with Mrs. Sanford and her daughter," he lamented.

"Would it be so bad? Miss Sanford is very sweet."

"Yes, but she says little and so do I. You must know by now her mother is anxious for an engagement, and I am not interested in any matchmaking."

Miss Barrow straightened to look at him, and he resisted the urge to brush a springy curl out of her eye. In the darkness, her gaze looked as green-black as the forest at midnight. "Yes, I believe you mentioned you find the idea of having a companion odious," she frowned.

"Fortunately, I am not the only bachelor on the island," Thomas pointed out. "There are at least a half dozen here tonight, and you cannot have them all."

Miss Barrow made a noise of annoyance in her throat. She was not in the mood for banter. Perhaps Marsh had unnerved her by all but asking her for the first dance in front of no less than a dozen witnesses. The sleeve of his coat brushed her arm, and impetuously, Thomas laced his hand through her elbow, just above her glove. She did not seem to mind and moved closer as if in search of comfort.

"Is – is something the matter?"

"I'm nervous," Miss Barrow admitted. "I have not performed

music in public for quite some time and cannot bear to sit through games and worry about it until the close of the evening."

"So you are not for cards. Then I will have to brave it alone."

"Oh, I will come down," she relented. "I only need to hear that I have nothing to fear and will do a fine job of it."

"If you don't," Thomas offered, "you are well liked here. I mean, liked well enough no one will laugh or say much about it. Not in your company at least."

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" Miss Barrow slanted her head in offense, but the corner of her mouth lifted with amusement. "You're doing a fine job of it."

Thomas laughed. It felt good. He did not mind a good meal or seeing his friends, but he winced to see young ladies paraded about and forced to perform like street puppets. "I'm only being honest," he assured her. "Why play if you do not wish to do it."

"Because," Miss Barrow explained, "I was asked and that is what's done."

"I'm sorry it's expected. I think I would refuse if I was forced to do anything like it."

"I'm certain you would, but I am a single woman," she reminded him with a petulant look.

Thomas studied her pursed lips, and a tempting thought crept into his mind. He stiffened and forced himself to look away. No, indeed. She would not be single long if he decided to kiss her.

"Mrs. Coker has quite taken you in. She's practically your patroness," he stammered, trying to ignore the ribbons of moonlight drawing them together.

"Yes," whispered Felicity in a hesitant voice. Her eyes examined him from his brow to his cheeks, across his wide nose, and then to his mouth. A bolt of hunger seared his heart and sent rolling tremors through his body to his knees. He wondered if he brushed his lips across hers, if she would taste as sweet and determined as the rest of her.

"How did you get that scar on your brow?"

Her query shook him from the spell like a bucket of cold water had been tipped over his head. Usually, any mention of it punched his chest and revived ugly memories, but she seemed genuine like she really wanted to know, so he did not mind. "From my father. It was an accident—sort of—if a crystal decanter is not meant to split open a child's face."

She gave a small gasp. "He was a monster," Thomas added gruffly. "I never think of him." That was a falsehood, he supposed, but a necessary one if he wanted to avoid her pity.

Miss Barrow continued her searching gaze, and Thomas found himself hypnotized, touched by the tenderness in her eyes. Her hand squeezed his arm. It made his feelings swirl as a part of him searched desperately for a way out of what his knotty heart craved. To kiss her might erase every troubling thought...

She inhaled as if she could hear his considerations and looked away. "Is that why you wanted to buy Sugar Hill? To redeem memories of your family?"

His breath hitched in his chest. "No, I - I want to burn it down. Blot it out. Make it as if it never existed."

Miss Barrow's eyes rounded in surprise, and he sensed her disenchantment with him. "My father was a cruel man, Miss Barrow. He made everyone around him miserable and afraid. Even my mama, she..." Thomas nearly choked on the words, but Miss Barrow nodded to encourage him on. He took an unsteady breath, deciding he could not bear to tell her everything. "She died of shame and a broken heart. He broke her spirit. He destroyed our family and our lives on a pile of so many others."

Miss Barrow's jaw tensed, and she gave him a sympathetic nod. "I am so sorry, Captain Doyle. I had no idea. No wonder you don't... well, it's no wonder you're not interested in settling."

"No, I suppose that is the root of it all. He lost most of our fortune and left me with little but my independence." *I could not make them love me enough to stay.*

"But look how far you have come," she insisted. "No doubt your family would be proud of you, and Sugar Hill positively idyllic if it weren't for your father's choices." A smile creased her lips, and Thomas nearly took her in his arms. Did she know he admired her? "It's certainly none of your fault, and you have done so very well."

"I should tell you," he began, "I mean, cards," he blurted instead like an idiot.

"Cards?" she repeated in confusion.

"Yes. I should tell you if you do not want to worry about a team, I will join you." Thomas cringed at the sound of his breathlessness. "Perhaps we will even be partnered, and I can distract you from worrying about your music. I'm a good player when I choose to be."

She gave another slow nod. "Cards."

Thomas's concerns returned to Marsh. "Of course, you may have someone else waiting for you."

She dropped her chin. "Oh, that is true."

"Marsh?" he persisted. "It appears you have won his approval."

Miss Barrow looked away, and he wondered if she was blushing. She lifted her shoulder in a dainty shrug but said nothing. Maybe she did not want to marry the man, but wasn't she eager?

Thomas took a deep breath and let it out slowly as if he had no cares. Why should such thoughts fill him with elation? What a poor card player he would be alongside Miss Barrow if he could hardly mask these whimsical feelings now. "Well," he exhaled, "he's all but secured the first dance at the ball. Let us see if he can capture you at the whist tables. If so, we'll work on that at our next lesson."

"Lesson?" She inclined her head.

"I did promise to give you the occasional instruction so perhaps we should set a day soon."

She gave a slight nod. "I suppose if I perform too poorly on the pianoforte I might provide an exhibition with your foils at the next party."

He chuckled. "It would certainly liven things up at the ball."

Felicity looked sideways at Thomas to see if he was jesting then burst into a giggle. "My mama would disown me."

Thomas grinned.

Downstairs, they teamed up for cards, and partnering with her, Thomas helped win three games. Miss Barrow became even more lively when her concentration was engaged. She was a competitor at heart which was probably why she agreed to leave London. She had to do better for her family. Clearly she wanted to, but she didn't appear too anxious to pursue Marsh, which meant she had some patience and clarity, he mused.

She played the pianoforte, a long piece that was classical and echoed pleasantly throughout the room. When she beamed at the compliments afterward, Marsh nearly made a fool of himself clapping and rising to his feet.

Thomas gave a nod of approval, for she had done well enough, and only then did he see her take a breath to calm herself after smiling with pleasure at Marsh's antics. She took a chair on the other side of her brother, and from the back of the room, Thomas was left with no choice but to contemplate her neck and the soft swells of her shoulder blades when he wasn't pretending to listen to

James murder a viola.

At long last, the party came to its sluggish end, and Fitz took his leave with a flurry of others after the parish priest, explaining that he must see Felicity home to rest. The pair said their goodbyes, and Thomas lamented he had no further opportunity to speak with her alone. He looked forward to another fencing lesson more than he should, but he craved her company for her conversation and wit. Her beauty he admired as well, no matter how much he tried to excuse it.

After plying Miss Barrow with platitudes and promises of future engagements all the way to the door, Marsh returned and invited Thomas to join him at Brown's for more cards when it became clear Mr. Coker was slightly intoxicated and too enamored of his pretty wife to go out. Thomas kindly informed Marsh he had to be aboard the *Defiant* before dawn and excused himself, hoping the man did not know his schedule.

Truth be told, he would only make a quick visit in the late morning and did not mean to sail for a couple more days while the treasury sorted out what had been settled up in the prize courts. He and the crew were anxious to receive their pay, and he had a decision to make about his next address.

It was the polite thing to do, he decided, at least to begin thinking about moving his things from Sugar Hill as it was no longer for sale. He would be arrested if he burned it down. He had rented a room here and there in the past or stayed on the ship, but now he desired a little place with a pleasant courtyard and good study where he could have some seclusion when he needed it and remain within good walking distance of his friends.

That included the Barrows, Thomas realized, as he accepted his coat from the butler. As much as he enjoyed the Cokers' company, he'd grown fond of seeing Fitz more, especially with Miss Barrow often at her brother's side.

Thomas drifted back upstairs to the door of the drawing room to say goodnight to his hosts again. There he found the couple whispering in each other's arms, and reddening, he backed out like a fool and hurried away.

James and Lisette were an enviable couple. They were not only suited but rather passionate at times without bothering to hide the fact. It made Thomas's mind shudder with surprise whenever he saw people smartly matched or in love. For most of his years, it'd

never occurred to him that any kind of marriage could be happy. His friendship with the Cokers had forced him to admit it was not always a horrific, binding agreement certain to end in bitterness and misery, although it had been for his mama.

He exhaled in exhaustion as he cantered uphill leaving Basseterre behind him. As he travelled to the plantation house, the crux of so many conflicting childhood memories of play and pain, and laughter and screams, made him wonder why he did not return to the ship and sleep in his quarters instead. Miss Barrow had spent two nights there after he'd saved her from the *Anguille* and left a long golden strand of hair on his blanket along with the foreign fragrance of her floral femininity. It'd faded after the second night he'd sent her to shore, but he could still conjure the scent in his mind if he tried. A simmering tendril of desire snaked through him, and he wondered what it would be like to lie his head next to hers.

The only thing Thomas enjoyed more than thinking of her was seeing her alive, safe, and happy, without Marsh pandering at her side, that was. Thomas looked up through the tree canopy at the lingering echo of an unhappy monkey's howl in the distance. For a moment he wondered if it was the ghosts of the past calling him home. He frowned. He'd found solace in his life on the water so what good had returning to Sugar Hill done? He could burn it all down, but that didn't mean the memories would go up in smoke with it.

Could he make new ones? Could he find a certain happiness like the Cokers held so dear? Finding a new home would be easy. Believing that his mother and father were wrong, and that marriage was not a punishment or death sentence was a little more difficult. Time and people like the Cokers had shown him otherwise. Could he believe in something like that for himself? Accept that a proper marriage could give him the peace he'd sought for so long? Capturing pirates and taking prisoners had not done it.

A picture of Miss Barrow aboard the *Anguille* fighting through her fear flashed in Thomas's mind. Yes, he could see it, with someone brave and enduring like little Flick. He smiled to himself. Of course, she was on a mission and did not see how well they complemented one another. Thomas did not have the title or respect she craved, and he would never leave the Indies.

Perhaps Marsh's devotions and accolades would win her over in the end. He certainly had money and there was no scandalous

family history. Marsh would be a good husband for Miss Barrow if he truly cared for her.

Despite his distaste imagining the pair together, Thomas realized this meant it was possible there could be a good woman out there for him. If there was a Miss Barrow, that meant there had to be more. Someone just like her that wasn't racing to make a match or sail back to England a heroine. He'd just have to open his eyes and pay attention. A weighty ball of reluctance formed in his chest. He'd just have to forget how she made him feel. It was for her own good, for the both of them...



Chapter Ten



Felicity carried two secrets in her heart. The first was that she felt panicked whenever she thought about a match with Mr. Marsh. The second—that she was in no hurry to return to London after all.

She wrote letters by lamp light in the evenings, saying nothing to Mama about her promises of fun when Felicity returned happily wed, and did not mention Femy had written since Mama decreed they must not say her name. Daylight hours were filled with embroidery, accompanying Mrs. Harris to the market, walks along the grassy embankments above the shore, and making polite calls to the neighbors or her sisters of St. George's parish church, and other new friends. She read a little and pruned the flowers in Fitz's garden a great deal. It had come to life. She liked to think she had something to do with it, for a piece of her had come to life, too. It was a new and surprising part like a fresh chapter in a book.

One morning, a fortnight after the Coker's dinner, after going over Fitz's calendar so she might know when he would next depart, Felicity waited with some unease in the parlor for Mr. Marsh to call. He had asked her if he might last Sunday afternoon.

What she had first thought of as friendly calls, had quickly become serious indeed, and though she knew that was how it was supposed to happen, she'd distanced herself from it, as if watching these chapters of her new life from an open window. To be honest, she wasn't overjoyed with what she saw unfolding from this view.

Felicity had not told Fitz her secrets. She could not find the courage, but she'd admitted the evening before that she did not think she was looking forward to a suitor's call as she had just seen Mr. Marsh on Sunday and before that at the Cokers. Fitz had snickered in amusement and whistled a wedding tune.

A rap on the front door made her startle, and she set her embroidery aside and smoothed down her light skirts, thankful it

was suggestive of rain. Today she might not have to be rattled over gouged dirt roads trying to think of responses to Mr. Marsh's generous compliments after all. He was so good to her it left her tongue-tied and overly shy.

Mrs. Harris swung the parlor door open. "Captain Doyle, Ma'am."

Felicity jumped to her feet. "Doyle!" she cried, before realizing she sounded too delighted to see him—and perhaps relieved. He removed a wool bicorn in a sweeping motion as Mrs. Harris reached for it then floated out of the room. "You seem surprised."

"Why, no! I mean," sputtered Felicity, "I am only happy it's you. I mean, yes." She exhaled in exasperation as his dark eyes danced with a rare amusement. "Please," she insisted, "sit down."

He filled a rather uncomfortable stiff chair by the window rather than sit beside her, and disappointment pricked her heart. How she had enjoyed standing arm to arm with him on the Cokers' veranda. Alas, Fitz did not have a great deal of furnishings, and few of them were anything but perfunctory. "I'm sorry we are not better situated for guests."

He waved her off. "Your brother is a bachelor. You must not concern yourself about it."

Felicity gave him a smile of appreciation. "I'm glad you understand. Mr. Marsh has been after him for weeks to better furnish the place, but Fitz sees little point beyond my own basic comforts."

"Yes, I know," Captain Doyle replied. "If you recall I had no choice but to sleep on the settle when I last saw him home, and how my legs hung over like a monkey's."

Felicity laughed. "Now that would be a sight to see." She pressed her lips together to contain her pleasure at seeing him. "Really I am surprised you are here unless you've come to give me another lesson."

"If you're willing, but I don't have very long," Captain Doyle replied. He leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. "When I last arranged it with you, I did not know things would change. That is why I've come." His gaze flitted past her as if he was hesitant to explain. After a moment's silence, he continued, "I'm afraid I've received word about an unwelcome visitor in the southeast and must make sail at once, but I can spare a few minutes in the courtyard to see how you've improved."

"Fitz worked with me for an hour before he sailed away."

Felicity straightened in her seat then asked with curiosity, "Pirates?" Thomas studied her. "You can tell me," she breathed with earnestness, "I won't say a word."

The corner of his mouth crooked up. "I don't mind who you tell, I just don't want to frighten you. It could be anything, you see, or nothing at all. They flew no colors and suspicions are high. It was just a little schooner, but sneaky and fast."

"You of all people should know that won't frighten me." Felicity's stomach tensed. It did concern her. As did the occasional nightmares that still seeped into her dreams at night. She squared her shoulders. "I suppose if they are pirates they might be wicked."

"Most pirates are," Captain Doyle declared, "although they are not all murderers as you well know." He set his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin in his palm. "You were extraordinarily fortunate."

"I know."

He studied her. "I'm not sure you do really. There are terrible things that—"

"I know, Captain Doyle. I do have a wardroom's worth of brothers, not to mention a capricious sister." Felicity felt her face flush at her disloyal complaint about Femy.

He raised the brow with the jagged scar. It almost made him look sinister, except she knew that he was not. "Would you like a little practice before I go? Perhaps it will keep you safe while your brother and I am away at sea."

Felicity chuckled. "I am as safe as anyone anywhere here in Basseterre," she insisted, ignoring the naivety of her opinion. Captain Doyle's eyes shadowed, and determined to brighten him up, Felicity rose to her feet. "I shall not change so you must not chase me all over the garden."

Ripples of quiet laughter followed her out to the airy courtyard. She hadn't quite meant it that way, but Felicity decided not to explain, as deep down she quite liked being chased by Captain Doyle. That admission would have stifled his amusement to be sure.

Wielding some of Fitz's old weapons, Felicity survived three bouts against the captain as a few raindrops plopped down, but she did not win. She nearly tossed the foil to the ground in frustration on his last point. "Ugh," she groaned, "you are much harder on me than Fitz."

Captain Doyle twirled his ill-used rapier she was sure had given

him the advantage. "So you will be better than a Barrow," he teased. "Perhaps you will be able to take on all of your siblings when I'm finished with you."

The rain became a drizzle even though the sun shone. Felicity cupped her hands over her head and ducked back inside with her tutor at her heels. "I have always been better than Femy," she called over her shoulder. She led the way back to the parlor smoothing down her hair. "I am nearly as good as the twins."

Captain Doyle dispensed of Fitz's things into the study then joined her in the parlor. When he folded himself down beside her on the small settle, his hand brushed her arm, and it made her tremble a little bit inside. It wasn't that she was afraid. Quite the opposite in fact. She wanted to lean her head on his shoulder and feel his thoughts in the quiet.

"Your sister is..." He hesitated as if searching for the right words.

"She's candid and outspoken," Felicity explained, stowing away her affection for the man beside her, "and unwilling to hold her tongue if she thinks she can amuse anyone. For that, I have heard more than my share."

"I see."

"Do you?" Felicity tried not to raise her voice as she admitted her frustration. "She says what she feels, and feels violently what she says. I'm afraid my mama has nearly fainted at the words spilling out of her mouth and at the most inopportune times, too."

"Well," asked Captain Doyle, "is she honest?"

"I suppose," admitted Felicity. No, Femy never lied. "That is the problem. She always says exactly what she thinks about what is true, whether it is appropriate or not."

"There's something to be admired in that," Captain Doyle thought. "I rather like to know where I stand."

"Oh," argued Felicity, "but do you really want to know what your hair looks like from the back or have it pointed out that you've dripped your soup or be asked where you spent your last evening and with whom because of rumors?"

"My last evening?" Captain Doyle eyed her with surprise, and Felicity blustered, "No, I mean my sister would ask as much."

He clasped his hands and leaned forward. "I don't suppose I'd have any reason to mind her unless I had something to hide. By the way, I spent last evening in the sparse and rotted library at Sugar Hill just so you know."

"You don't have anything to hide? Nothing at all?" Felicity insisted.

"Like what?" He turned his head to her, but a guarded layer of reservation settled over his eyes.

Felicity studied him back. She wondered about his father and what he had said at the Cokers party when they were alone on the veranda. "You don't speak a great deal about your life or family very often."

"There isn't much to tell," he returned after an odd pause. "I was born here without brothers or sisters and both of my parents are dead." He shuffled his boots like he intended to leave.

Felicity felt a twinge of disappointment. She rose to her slippers, sad he seemed ready to depart so soon. "You were going to buy Sugar Hill from my family," she said.

"I was. It is my former home." He stretched his lips into a brief smile that quickly vanished. "It was just an understanding between Fitz and me. Nothing was signed, as it had not been approved by your elder brother."

"Then you learned it was to be my dowry."

"Yes," he admitted. "Fitz didn't know."

"I didn't know until I was sent abroad," Felicity explained. "It was a different arrangement than what my father had planned." She wondered how much Doyle knew. "I'm sorry it's no longer available to you."

Captain Doyle's gaze became lost on the swept floorboards as he ran his fingers up and down the hem of his coat. "Well, I am sorry to miss a lesson next week and only came to tell you I shan't be about for some time." Felicity watched his cheek flicker. When he looked up, the depths of his gaze made something in her heart jump like a horse over a gate. "I do wish you luck with your plans," he said. "Perhaps Mr. Marsh can be tempted to have the property."

The happy, imaginary horse came down on its knees. Felicity's heart sank like a stone into a murky, confusing pond. "He is anxious to return to London."

"How encouraging for you, and of course, I'm sure you will be inundated at the ball with new admirers. You will be able to return to London in all your glory whenever you are ready to choose."

"Are you coming?" Felicity squeezed her hands. She realized she wanted him there, not just because she would know him, and he knew Fitz, but because... "You are coming aren't you?"

"Yes," Captain Doyle assured her, "as far as I know. Do you have any dances left, or have Marsh and Lieutenant Shirley claimed them all?"

Felicity felt the apples of her cheeks turn balmy. "Don't tease me, Doyle. It was poor form for Mr. Marsh to ask me at the Cokers' party and right during dinner, too. I was nearly discomfited."

He put his hands on his hips. "Well, what would Femy say?"

"She would have been delighted," Felicity admitted, "and already have her *programme du bal* full of names."

Captain Doyle grinned. "I am happy to dance with you, but it must be two," he insisted. "You must make Marsh work a little harder."

With a spark of happiness, Felicity could think of nothing that would please her more even if two dances with the captain would invite gossip. "Why I'm perfectly happy to do that since I suspect Marsh will want another."

"We cannot let him have you all to himself until you are certain you've made up your mind," the captain warned. "No one takes every word and gesture as seriously as someone anxious for love."

Felicity bristled. "I am certain he is not in love! And I'm, well, I'm not anxious for love," she insisted. "Only anxious to..."

"Do your duty. Marry well. Return home connected and wealthier for the family."

"Well, I do have a duty," Felicity retorted, feeling stung. "Femy ruined my chances, you see. That's why I've come. She, well," Felicity became itchy-hot all over. "She ran off... with a footman." She glared at Captain Doyle for making her say it. "A footman!"

Rather than looked shocked, he raised one shoulder at an awkward angle. "Is he a good man?"

"I don't know!"

"Does she love him?"

"I certainly hope so."

He wagged his chin carelessly. "Really when it's all said and done, what does it matter as long as neither one is miserable?"

Felicity stared in surprise. "I have no doubt they are over the moon. They're so stupidly in love they care nothing about what anyone else thinks."

"Titles and land and money. Bah!" exclaimed Captain Doyle. "Over the moon is the only kind of match I would ever advocate, footman or not."

"Truly?" Felicity could not help but wonder that he did not mind Femy's scandal, and he sounded just like her.

"Yes, really." Captain Doyle smoothed down his coat. "I am no champion of the marriage state as you very well know," he intoned.

"Yes, you've made that abundantly clear." Even as she pointed it out, Felicity's chest pinched. Why did the captain abhor marriage so much? "I understand you did not have a happy childhood, but may I ask why?"

He turned his gaze away as if he could not meet her eye.

"Why not? You know my position, and I even confided my rather tangled feelings for Mr. Marsh."

Captain Doyle gave Felicity a soft smile as if she were amusing. "You cannot hide them. Your eyes tell all which is why you need me to partner you at whist. You're terrible, by the way."

Felicity gritted her teeth and pushed her complicated feelings for the captain to the back of her mind. If Mr. Marsh made her feel tangled, Captain Doyle, of late, had her heart in absolute knots. She certainly couldn't let that show on her face. "So you never want to marry ever?"

He stood and tapped his bicorn onto his head. "Never."

"Someday you might," she groused.

"That would be unfortunate," he replied, "but you would never know because you will be on your way back to England, and perhaps with Mr. Marsh."

Felicity inhaled sharply. She did not know how she felt about that. She wanted to be right here when Captain Thomas Doyle decided to take a bride. The thought startled her.

"I should go," he said, breaking the stalemate. "You must remember you promised me a dance so I do not have to prance around with Mrs. Sanford all evening."

Felicity softened at his droll attempt at humor. "I promise. Now go chase your scallywags and don't forget my next lesson is with a rapier. It's not fair to give me a foil and you have something stronger."

"When I return." He crossed the room and reached for the door, but it yawned open into his hands. Mrs. Harris stepped in with a stiff chin and bright eyes. Her eyes darted from Captain Doyle to Felicity. "Mr. Marsh," she said, and it almost came out a croak.

Mr. Marsh stepped in and looked with some confusion at Captain Doyle, but with nothing more than a flicker in his jaw, he

dipped his head in polite acknowledgement. Felicity flushed at the unexpected debacle, but Captain Doyle bowed and told him he was on his way out then rushed away as if he'd just rushed in.

Felicity sank back onto the settle, her heart hammering like waves battering the beach before an oncoming storm. She took a breath to calm herself. If only Femy were here. She would know what to do, and she would do it no matter the cost.



Chapter Eleven



It was not the first time that Thomas wished he kept a horse rather than rent the occasional nag for a few guineas a month. He marched over the cobblestones with the sun arching over Basseterre like a rainbow of fire, cooking himself as he hurried toward the docks hoping his trunk had arrived and was stowed aboard.

There was little time and no telling when he would return. He had wasted enough tide stopping by the Barrow's cottage, but he simply could not take his leave without letting Miss Barrow know he would not keep their appointment. He certainly did not want her to think he'd forgotten about it. She seemed to revel in his praise and forget her stiff manners and opinions when she took up a foil. He was quite impressed with her progress.

By all accounts, Fitz had taught her well, and her younger brothers had certainly challenged her. If she were angry and in fear of her life, she would put up a good fight against a sloppy or overconfident man. Not that he could actually see her running anyone through. With an amused smile, Thomas suspected Miss Barrow would hesitate to wound someone if she stopped to consider whether or not it was proper.

She did see the world in black and white, right and wrong, but perhaps her time at sea and months in the Indies had begun to color her world. Not every gentleman was honourable, not every criminal guilty of anything more than trying to survive. Why even her own sister had turned the family on its head by absconding with a servant, but she sounded happy and in love. Fitz had certainly left those details out.

It all made sense now, mused Thomas. A sister had ruined the family's name among the ton and dashed all of Miss Barrow's chances to find a husband. He knew she wanted to find love. If she didn't care about her heart, she'd have no eyes for anyone else but

Marsh, but she seemed to be stepping back.

Thomas nearly keeled over at what that could possibly mean for him. Someone from aboard the *Defiant* shouted, and he looked up to see the crew dart into action at the announcement that the captain was nearby. Lime-green water roiled around the pilings in a thick foam, and Thomas inhaled the familiar smell of fish and salt. He was anxious to feel the wind across his face. He needed it. To push out of this port past the other ships and their heaving masts. To escape to the horizon. To forget.... Well, he did not think so often of his parents now, but perhaps it would push Miss Barrow from his thoughts, too, so he did not continue dwelling on his private daydreams about her.

Marsh's arrival had surprised him this morning until he realized he'd interrupted a previously arranged call. Part of Thomas liked the idea of interrupting Marsh's plans, but another piece of him was sorry to have created a situation Miss Barrow would have to explain. He would have shrugged had he not leapt from the dock and grabbed hold of a line. He scurried over the gunwale rather than march himself aboard wondering if Miss Barrow had feelings for Marsh or not. With no intention to leave the Indies, and thanks to their disastrous history, Thomas was certainly not a contender despite his deep fondness for her. He could only hope she did not forget she had a duty to herself before her family's wishes. He could only dream she might be a little more like her sister than she knew.

THE WEATHER CLEARED, and Felicity found herself carrying a shawl and parasol to Mr. Marsh's carriage while her scalp itched under her bergère. He'd offered to take her to Frigate Bay, and being so reliable had not forgotten it, asking her immediately about it after church on Sunday. Mrs. Harris was not feeling well and encouraged Felicity to go without her.

"I am happy you are well rested after so much activity these few weeks past," Mr. Marsh said as he popped the whip and his horse took off jerking the gig along. They moved off down the street, and Felicity could not help but relax and enjoy the swift ride in the fresh sea air.

"Fitz left only yesterday, but I have had plenty of time to recover," Felicity assured him. "I am quite used to staying up late as we did so often in town," she explained. "My mama kept a busy

social calendar, and I often waited up to see her and to hear the news."

"You did not accompany them?"

"I have an elder sister," Felicity reminded him, although she did not mention Femy by name. "I did not go to balls during the Season, not for several years after she first came out," she explained.

"Oh, I see," murmured Mr. Marsh. "She was not an immediate success, I deduce."

"Oh, she was quite the success," Felicity insisted, "but she did not wish to marry too young, and so I waited. My mama does not believe one daughter should come out before the oldest is married unless it cannot be helped."

"You must be happy and relieved then," Mr. Marsh smiled, assuming Femy was wed, "and very patient."

Thankful he had not asked for details, Felicity said, "I have plenty of family to keep me occupied."

"How do you do while your brother is away?" wondered Mr. Marsh. "Do you like Mrs. Harris?"

"Oh, she's quite friendly and dependable. Discreet, too. I don't mind not having a great many servants at all, in fact, I quite like it." A breeze ruffled over the gig, and feeling a bit rebellious, Felicity closed her eyes and reveled in it. There were no sea breezes in Mayfair.

"Do you?" chuckled Mr. Marsh. "Well, I could not endure it. We are a house full at Marsh Winds since it is a small home best suited for an overseer and his family. I have had to make do in the Indies without good servants, but I have my secretary and valet, and of course, a cook. There is not a grand house on the property, but it's a great deal of land. I must take you to see it."

Thinking of Sugar Hill, Felicity took a deep breath. "Have you ever thought to build an addition?"

He looked sideways at her. "To an old overseer's lodgings? I should say not, but I am not inclined to stay in this seasonless climate for long with so little society. There is not much to do. No theater. No museums. And only one good club. After I see to business here, I will sail back to England."

That made perfect sense and seemed like a perfect situation for Felicity. Why did it not excite her then? They rode along, the road winding near the sandy coastline between rippling grasses and the frolicking sea. She happened to enjoy having less industry and

society. There were dinners and picnics and plenty of gardens and paths to walk here, not to mention the everchanging activity at the docks with different people and boats coming and going. And no ton, no real ton, to look down their noses and point their fingers. Less of them anyway. She pointed at a distant ship with a billowing pennant. "Is that my brother, I wonder?"

Mr. Marsh squinted. "I doubt it. Your brother does not stay within view of the island, although as of late, there has been a flurry of merchantmen sailing close along the coast, as close as they dare, and the fishermen do not go out as far, either."

"Pirates," murmured Felicity.

Mr. Marsh glanced at her with concern, and the gig leaned slightly. "Yes, and I am sorry you should have to hear of such a thing." He let go of the reins and covered her glove with his. "You must not worry, my dear. The forts have trustworthy watches, and the coastal gunships like your brother's do a fitting job. You're quite safe from that unforgiving lot." He gave her hand a little squeeze, and Felicity averted her eyes back out to sea. She wondered what he would say if he knew she'd already come face to face with an unforgiving pirate crew. If Mrs. Coker knew, eventually, he would hear of it. She shrank at the thought of his pity and concern.

Unbidden, Captain Doyle came to mind, and Felicity wondered where he had sailed away to. He was rather forgiving and fair with the prisoners he took. He did not handle them cruelly even if they deserved it. He merely turned them over to the authorities and went on his way, cleaning up the seas the way he seemed anxious to clean up his memories of Sugar Hill.

Mr. Marsh clucked his tongue and urged the horse on again. It was a fine chestnut gelding who looked misplaced pulling a gig in this tropical land. She exhaled to relax again, but her mind floundered like a swimmer in dangerous surf. Mr. Marsh was quite nice, and she now saw he harbored expectations from this attachment not too differently than Fitz, but perhaps they weren't the same expectations she harbored—not since at first.

Felicity tensed. If Mr. Marsh was intent on more than friendship so soon then she should gracefully bow out. She did not feel anything for him other than respect. As handsome as he was, something between them did not seem to fit. It was as if they were two of the same sort but cut from different cloth. They'd never match. How did one embrace a good and respectable friendship

without implying there was a desire for something more? Would Mr. Marsh give her advice and opinions about other gentlemen as Captain Doyle had done?

"Here we are." Mr. Marsh motioned at a wide stretch of sand spotted with the occasional palmetto casting lacey shadows. The beach was shaped like a horseshoe, forming a cove where the bright blue water becalmed.

"Why, how lovely," she sighed then furrowed her brow. "You were right to ask me if I had seen this place, Mr. Marsh. Fitz has not bothered to take me around the coastline, but I suppose he is on the water all of the time and thinks nothing of it."

"I'm sure that's it," smiled Mr. Marsh, "and not that he is busy with orders, maintenance, and crew." He jumped out of the gig, pushed back his hat, and held out his hand to help Felicity down.

"Oh, you are quite right," she admitted with chagrin. "I am lucky he invited me to come live here at all." She hopped out of the gig and landed with a clumsy smack almost on top of him. Hat and bonnet tangled, and his arms went around her to steady her balance. Felicity sucked in a breath and found her hands on his chest. She looked up with mortification.

"We are lucky he invited you here," Mr. Marsh repeated in a soft voice.

His long look made her stomach feel like someone was trying to tug her down through the sand. Felicity forced an appreciative-sounding chuckle and stepped away. Ignoring the rush of uncertainty she felt, she searched the horizon for something of interest. There was a sudden, secret urge to kick off her clogs and pull up her hem and skip down the small incline to the rutted beach. She walked instead.

The water lapped on the shore, and Felicity pointed at a small school of tiny fish when she heard Mr. Marsh behind her. "I see why the bigger fish come so close to shore in the mornings."

"Yes," he said gamely, "for bait." He carried a rolled blanket under his arm, and Felicity realized they were going to sit awhile. Not that she minded, for it was beautiful, but...

"Come." He held out an arm, and she accepted it. They walked down the beach watching for crabs and starfish and even spotted a flounder he insisted he would send a man back for later as if it would wait. It was quite a pleasant way to end the morning, that is until he escorted her back up the bank to sit under a cotton tree.

She lowered herself onto folded legs beside him and peered toward the road. Should she have insisted Mrs. Harris come? All of Basseterre had seen her jaunt off with Mr. Marsh this morning.

He sat with his knees bent and rested his arms on them as he gazed out to sea. Felicity tried not to feel so much or to worry about what he was thinking. Their silence was not comfortable. It was not like sitting with Fitz in the evenings or resting beside Captain Doyle in the parlor after a lesson. It certainly was not like standing side by side with the captain gazing at the moon overhead.

"Miss Barrow," said Mr. Marsh, interrupting the languid conversation between the rippling waves and the wind in the trees, "how do you find Frigate Bay?"

How did she find it? Much like the rest of this world. "Sunny and cheerful and fresh and open." She turned to him in earnest. "I love St. Christopher, even the laughter and teasing that carry along the breeze from the wharves and the market. I must confess I do not miss rainy, grey days and bleak fog. It's pleasant here, although I do cherish the first snowfall," she admitted. "Nothing could replace that, but I... well, I've had enough of them to give me the fondest of memories."

"One can never have enough snow after a long summer," tutted Mr. Marsh.

"I suppose you're right," she admitted, "though I would not mind swapping my longest winter for a season here."

"I suppose," he murmured, "but I seldom enjoy curling up in front of the fire in this climate." He reached over and took her hand, capturing her gaze. Felicity jerked in surprise. Even through her old riding gloves, he seemed warm.

"Speaking of fires in the hearth and of home, I hope you know how charmed I am to make your acquaintance. I can think of nothing more that would comfort me than returning to England soon, but how I would miss your good company." Mr. Marsh stared long and hard at her with eyes that reflected the azure sky and water.

A streak of heat hotter than the sun arrowed down her back, and Felicity suddenly felt quite uncomfortable. Proper and fine-looking, not to mention rich and single, Mr. Marsh was a wonderful man who would make a good companion, but the thought of it made her stomach twist. He did not make her heart soar. He did not make her feel like, well, how Femy insisted it should feel.

"Th – thank you," she murmured. Shouldn't she be elated she had a serious prospect? She wasn't. Although everything she'd planned and hoped for was coming to fruition, none of it felt right. Rather, Felicity realized, she wanted to bury her head in the sand until the next time Captain Doyle sailed into port.

Chapter Twelve

The timbers shivered, and Thomas reached out to steady himself as he watched his men throw buckets of dirty water overboard. He clenched and unclenched his jaw. The *Rooster* was a small ship, a rather annoying mosquito, that slunk up to sleepy islands during the night and waited like a spider for fishermen to make their way out to their fishing spots at dawn. The rogues would rob the fishermen of what little they had—nets, barrels, and even their clothes. Rumors warned they liked to kidnap sturdy and strong victims as well, and trade or sell them off to other pirate ships for what little they could get in return.

Disgusted with their literal prey for pay morality, Thomas blasted away most of the *Rooster's* threadbare canvas sails then sent the mast over the side. He'd nearly destroyed the little prize, not that it would have much value, but a merchant might purchase it if the Navy didn't scavenge it for parts.

He trudged back to his cabin, bracing himself for an interview with the first mate who'd been lucky enough to survive because he'd surrendered. The captain was in chains below, but his fellow shipmate was anxious to trade information to save himself. Thomas doubted the first mate had anything of value to offer. The *Rooster* carried more rum than vittles, and only a light purse was found in the captain's tiny quarters. Besides that, the *Defiant* had made little yield on her investment, but at least the ne'er-do-wells were out of the waters.

Once inside the shadows of his aftercabin, Thomas found a certain Mr. Walsh clapped in irons and tied to a chair. He was a pudgy man with bad teeth and a red bald spot. Thomas dropped down in a narrow chair at the table that served his dinner and held the navigation charts. He glowered.

The miscreant grinned back as if they were friends, ignoring his

leg irons. An odor emanating from him smelled like a whale carcass, and his skin was streaked with tarry grime. The eyes, however, were as round and intelligent as a crow's and radiated a bloodthirsty black light. "Capital of you to have a friendly word, captain," the pirate warbled with a bob of his head.

"I have no amiable words for you," Thomas replied. "Your ship has nothing of value other than its own sodden timbers. What did you want from me?"

"A king's pardon?" Mr. Walsh smirked as if he was joking, but he was not.

"That's unlikely."

"Your forgiveness?" the man tried again.

Thomas sniffed the sweaty rum-laced air and thought of his father. "No."

"Well then," Walsh continued with a sly smile as if Thomas couldn't crush him with one arm, "I guess I'll be keeping word of any attacks I know about to meself."

Thomas leaned back on the back two legs of his chair. "Every pirate I ever capture protests his innocence or offers up great secrets." He snorted. "If the islands were in danger of an attack by a fleet of villains as puny and malodourous as you, the Royal Navy would have caught wind of it long before either one of us."

"Even a good sleight of hand can trick a magician."

"And what tricks have you seen?" Thomas dropped forward with a bang, gripping his fingers on the table's edge to keep from pounding his fists. He'd rather be on his way and have Mr. Edens take the remnants of the *Rooster* back to the authorities so they could decide its fate. Mr. Walsh could walk the plank for all he cared.

The pirate leaned forward. "There be games afoot," he crooned in a hushed voice. "There are some who're tired of your jaunts around the Indies; you 'un privateers I mean, and the Navy. French frogs, ol' Andrew—everyone got their finger in the pie but us."

"Us?"

"Even an honest buccaneer needs to make a living," complained Walsh.

"I'm afraid your integrity is highly questionable, and the French no longer control these waters," retorted Thomas. "As for 'Andrew,' as you call them, the Royal Navy has every right to patrol the Leewards."

Walsh put a finger aside his nose. "That's right. The Crown's just trying to set St. Christopher back to rights. You got enough redcoats at them batteries?"

"Enough to handle your little dinghy," Thomas vowed.

"Enough for all them Englishmen that come back? Bringing them fancy dishes and furnitures, purses filled with gold, laps filled with..." Mr. Walsh grinned at Thomas, and a dribble of saliva wet the corner of his mouth and made it glisten. "Pretty womens," he finished.

Thomas shot across the table before he saw Miss Barrow's face in his mind. His fist curled around the front of Walsh's stained tunic as he imagined what someone like Walsh might do to a woman like her. The pirate pushed back in his seat, his jaw slumped and eyes wide with fear.

"If you know of an attack planned anywhere in the Leewards you better speak now—and pray no woman I know is ever touched by the likes of you, else I will see you are the first hung after you're drawn and quartered."

Walsh scowled and coughed up something unpleasant, and with blazing eyes, Thomas dared him to do something with it. The pirate swallowed then looked away.

"Well?"

"What's in it for me?" Walsh's voice gave away a slight tremor.

"Nothing."

The man exhaled and wrinkled his forehead. "You can let me off at the next cay."

"That's not going to happen." Thomas tightened his grip.

Walsh stiffened. "Well keelhaul me or throw me overboard, but I ain't got nothing more to say to you, Captain."

"You never had anything to say at all," Thomas guessed. He made a note to pass the threat along to Fitz Barrow so he could inform his superiors, but Thomas doubted it would go very far up the line. Walsh was just blowing smoke. There had been trifling pirates here and there of late but nothing to suggest an attack.

"If you say so, Captain." Walsh's smirk was infuriating, but Thomas knew every desperate man facing the gallows made up any lie he could think of to save himself.

"The age of pirates is over and gone," Thomas growled to his prisoner. "The Kingdom and the French own the waters of the Indies now. There are no more Calico Jacks or Blackbeards."

Walsh let out a defensive laugh of disbelief.

"You'll never rule the waves as they did before; never rob or murder innocent women and children. Not on my watch. It would take a great gathering and organization of criminals to attack the Indies, even to besiege English Harbor, and such plans would not go unnoticed."

Mr. Walsh shrugged and mumbled, "Should have been a preacher, you, but you'll remember me a prophet."

Thomas rose from his chair and snatched the pirate up by the shoulder. He pulled the hobbling captive to the door, threw it open, and shouted for the prisoner to be escorted below. Mr. Walsh disappeared with a shove, and Thomas spun on his heel and skirted the table to peer out of a porthole.

He was the keeper of the waters around his island, and he'd sworn on his life the Miss Barrows of the world would never have to fear if he had his way. *Capitaine* Hervieux of the *Anguille* would soon hang if he had not yet, and poor Mr. Walsh would disappear the same way with no mention of his ever existing in the history of the sea.

Thomas gritted his teeth with disgust for the man he'd just tossed from his quarters. He meant what he thought: Miss Barrow would never come to harm again. He might not have the power to save every damsel in distress as Mama's death had proven, but he could protect Commander Barrow's sister from men like Walsh—and his father. She was worthy of it, deserving.

Mama's red-rimmed eyes peered up at him from the depths of his mind, sad, tired, and beaten. If she had died of a broken heart, it'd been broken by loneliness and crushed dreams. Thomas had sworn he would never marry and make a woman miserable like that, but perhaps he'd been mistaken. Perhaps in swearing off a wife he'd only made himself the victim. In his heart of hearts, he was sad. Tired. Scarred. What if it was not too late to save himself?

Thomas watched blue waves dance around the ship. He was not Mr. Edgar Doyle. Being his son did not make him like him for he would never treat a woman the way his father treated them. Could Miss Barrow ever understand that? See beyond his family shame?

His heart frog-hopped over the secret wish. Why not take the risk? If he could sail into enemy fire and face down the worst mankind had to offer, he should be brave enough to waltz into a ballroom and offer his arm and heart if his instincts told him it was

right.

Felicity Barrow felt right. His heart lurched like a sail catching the wind every time he looked into her blue-green eyes. He also knew the only way to continue to enjoy her companionship and protect her meant becoming more than an acquaintance or friend; something more than a privateer who'd mistaken her for a pirate. Perhaps, he thought, as the ship rocked over the sea, if he loved her enough she would stay and be happy with him.

WEEKS WHIRLED AWAY like a spinning wheel, and before she knew it, Felicity found herself in Mrs. Coker's parlor with more pins in her than a pincushion could hold. The pieces of gown pinned over her shoulders were too exquisite to be believed. She watched the mantua-maker in the long mirror respond to Mrs. Coker's advisements from her perch on a downy footstool.

"You're going to look like a goddess," Mrs. Coker whispered, clapping her hands together.

Felicity studied her own wispy hair and the reddish hue of her cheeks and throat in the looking glass's reflection. "I don't see how. I cannot seem to avoid the sun even with hats and gloves and parasols, and my hair will not lie flat."

"No one's hair lies down here," Mrs. Coker dismissed her. "It's either too breezy or the climate disagrees entirely." She stroked her perfectly arranged locks and then patted down a few dark errant hairs. "See?"

Felicity pressed her lips to keep from smiling but failed. "You always look elegant, Mrs. Coker. I look like a child that's dashed out of her room before she's been properly put together."

"Now, now. Don't lose focus. This gown is one of the most beautiful I've ever seen, and all eyes will be on you, my most properly put-together-friend." Mrs. Coker patted down Felicity's loose braid as the dressmaker began to disassemble what would be a wide hem with hand-embroidered scallops in gold thread. A thin layer of sheer muslin over a lavender shift hinted at something of which Felicity was not sure, but she did like the subtle shades of purple and agreed it made her eyes greener, and this in turn, made her complexion look smooth and glow indeed.

"It will be your coming out."

"I'm almost five and twenty. I've already had a coming out,"

Felicity stammered.

"Not on St. Christopher. A concert and a few dinners do not count although you have been here for some time. This is your first ball in St. Christopher, and the most important one of the year." Mrs. Coker murmured something to the skilled artisan who was helped from the room. "You do know everyone will be there," she called, returning to Felicity, "even guests from other islands. Mr. Marsh will have his hands full if he is to retain your attention."

Felicity accepted her friend's hand and stepped down onto the rug on the floor. Mrs. Coker reached for Felicity's day dress and helped her pull it over her head. "You're quiet. What does that mean?" she prodded.

Felicity stared at the looking glass and realized she looked unhappy, if not dissatisfied. "Do you think Captain Doyle will return in time? He told me he planned to attend."

"Oh, Doyle?" Mrs. Coker echoed. "He tends to avoid society whenever he can unless there are games afoot, and by games, I mean chances for prizes at sea he can hoard like a magpie. He takes little interest in dinners and dancing beyond his closest friends."

"I have noticed."

"Well, he is intent on restoring the family coffers and purchasing that overgrown jungled house he dwells in, but he seems especially fond of you. If he told you he would come then you can count on it."

The reassurance lightened Felicity's spirits. "You do know Sugar Hill is not for sale? It is my dowry, you see, and part of the reason I have come."

Mrs. Coker turned her around so they were nose to nose. "Is that so? How did I miss that little detail of island gossip?"

"I suppose not many people know, and Fitz, for once, forgot to tell you."

Mrs. Coker widened her eyes. "Does Doyle know?"

"Yes."

"I wonder why he has not mentioned it. I know he had every intention of making an offer to purchase it at one time. *Hmm*. Tell me, how are your lessons going?"

"I'd like to think I've improved," Felicity decided, "although our last lesson was brief. He took off just like Fitz after someone or something at sea."

"Oh, yes. I believe that was mentioned the last time Mr. Marsh

called."

"Mr. Marsh, yes. He does like to keep abreast of the news," Felicity faltered. Besides his wealth, he talked of little else other than who was doing what and where. Mrs. Coker studied her, smiled a little, and dropped back down onto her wide footstool. She patted it, and Felicity lowered herself beside her feeling a prickle of anxiety.

"You have said little about your carriage ride to Frigate Bay with Mr. Marsh other than that it was lovely and you had a nice chat." Mrs. Coker inclined her head. "Are you sure you enjoyed it?"

Felicity looked down at her hands and laced them together. "I enjoyed the scenery," she offered in a soft tone.

Mrs. Coker burst into laughter. "The scenery? Do you mean the shore or the gentleman?"

Felicity's gaze swooped up to meet her friend's. "I meant the sand and the water, I'm afraid. You see..." She hesitated, feeling much like Femy, but a surprising surge of stubbornness kept her from caring. "I don't believe Mr. Marsh is for me," she admitted, "but I'm not sure. He is quite older, serious, not fond of the Indies, and perhaps too fond of his mother. Of course, his home lies many miles away from Worcester, and I don't think such a lonely landscape would suit me."

Mrs. Coker took her hand. "My dear, there is nothing wrong with feeling suspect. You must trust your intuition and not rush to judgement. If he does not appeal to your likes and hopes, and you feel nothing for him, perhaps you should not be so inclined to hurry into an attachment. You are not required to rush to a decision just because a man wants to take you riding in his gig."

A knot tangled in Felicity's throat. "My family is awaiting news. That's why they sent me here. I believe my brother and Mr. Marsh had some sort of understanding, that is, that Fitz hoped to introduce me to him when I arrived, and Mr. Marsh, it seems, was happy to meet me as he is single, too."

"I suppose it is because of that house that is to be your dowry," guessed Mrs. Coker.

"Oh, no, Mr. Marsh does not want to stay here. He is not that interested in Sugar Hill."

"Are you sure?"

"I believe so," Felicity said but wondered why she should feel so doubtful now.

"How unlucky for Captain Doyle," murmured Mrs. Coker.

"I'm sure he's disappointed he will not be able to stay on," admitted Felicity. "I feel dreadful about it."

"I'm sure he will find a more suitable address with no trouble. He is only drawn to Sugar Hill because he spent his boyhood there. It was once a great house."

Felicity recalled Captain Doyle's memories of his father. "He has not always spoken fondly of it. I don't believe it would still be standing if he had any say."

"Of that I'm not sure, but I know he has ghosts. It's only natural to want to dwell on our pasts, but that is not a healthy thing if you ask me. Now," Mrs. Coker stood, "if you do not feel a swoon coming on every time Mr. Marsh takes your hand, perhaps you should consider shifting your attention to someone else for a time."

Like Captain Doyle, Felicity thought, but she did not say it. He wanted nothing to do with marriage, and besides, he was her brother's good friend.

"What about Lieutenant Shirley?" Mrs. Coker suggested with a teasing grin. "He's a good fellow, and your brother says nothing but kind things about him."

"Yes," Felicity considered in a faint tone. The lieutenant was on course to be a captain someday, which meant, she supposed, that he was a second son like Fitz and probably of good family. He was indeed pleasant and not unhandsome. She pressed her teeth together. "I suppose I should make myself available," she murmured.

"You should," agreed Mrs. Coker smartly, "but not because of duty or family. Do it for yourself, Miss Barrow. There will be bachelors and widowers and an assortment of officers—and privateers—at the ball. With your good looks, a new gown, and the reputation of your brother and esteemed family in London, you will be the catch of the year for anyone in want of a wife in the Indies.

"My esteemed family in London?" Felicity swallowed and looked into the mirror again, seeing the beady eyes of the ton glaring back at her. *Oh, Femy, no wonder you threw everything to the wind and ran away.*



Chapter Thirteen



With little outcome after the Navy's scurry to investigate a suspicious floating armada, Thomas sailed into Basseterre as dawn whispered pink secrets over the horizon. He took care of business at the customs house with what he had to report then found a horse to carry him up the sloping landscape into the eastern hills. Upon his arrival to Sugar Hill, he found its decaying remains in no better condition than when he'd left and hurried to the room that had once been his mother's. He was not worried about his lack of income from his last voyage but consumed with the idea of seeing Miss Barrow again. In his chambers, he spun around looking for what he'd need.

Everything had been taken out except for a small bed, side table, and an old heavy armchair. Even the paintings had been removed. From his washboard, Thomas scrubbed his dusty face then wandered around in search of the bathing tub he knew he'd last used in a room akin to his quarters. He found it in a closet, and with a grunt of determination, hurried outside with two buckets to haul in fresh water from a hillside stream.

Never before had he taken such pains to prepare for a silly ball, he disparaged himself, as he squeezed into the small tub a good hour later. He'd tossed around all the night before thinking about which waistcoat he should wear and how to manipulate his cravat like a witless dandy. He did not keep a valet as he ought because his steward aboard the *Defiant* saw to his every whim. He wondered with regret if he should have asked Keeble to accompany him to Sugar Hill, but the steward was already comfortably situated with his wife in their little cottage by now.

With a reluctant sigh, Thomas accepted his own talents would have to do, and he concentrated on his appearance for the next several hours as he dressed in his finest. The horse he'd brought up

from the port was not happy to be ridden into town for a second time, but he cajoled the animal with a pinch of sugar and promised more later although she couldn't understand a word of it.

It was just minutes after nine o'clock when Thomas found himself arrived. He straightened the new top hat purchased in Antigua from a London supplier and took what he hoped was an unnoticeable breath of courage to quell the suspense rattling behind his ribs. Greeting his familiars, he strode confidently up the stairs of the customs house to a large room used for balls and other official events. He found to his great comfort he was not the first to arrive but prompt enough not to be considered late and in want of attention.

Ladies and their gentlemen dotted the room. Blazing candles made anything made of silk, silver, or glass sparkle like diamonds. Thomas caught a whiff of baked confectionaries, and his mouth watered. He'd eaten lightly and hoped it would get him through the evening until the customary supper after midnight—if he was still standing.

He darted his gaze around the room until he found James Coker watching the festivities with his hands clutching his lapels. Mrs. Coker was speaking in earnest to their companions around them. James saw Thomas, lifted his chin in invitation, and Thomas wove through the crowd to join the popular throng.

It was not until then Thomas spied the governor on Coker's other side. A long nose and sharp chin underscored receding hair unencumbered by the fading tradition of wig and powder. Coker made a quick introduction as a reminder, and Governor Elliot complimented Thomas on his service and the relative safety of St. Christopher's, which had not been attacked since Jérôme Bonaparte's failed attempt two years ago. Thomas made a modest response and withdrew from the conversation but not before Mrs. Coker took his arm.

"How happy I am to see you, Doyle!" she said with a hint of glee. "We ladies are outnumbered, and I hoped to dance with you."

"You may count on it," Thomas assured her. He had just missed the opening minuet and presumed the governor had taken her hand although there were other women in attendance from all over the Indies.

Those of some rank had arrived in force, even women who looked down their noses at the exotic Mrs. Coker. From Thomas's

point of view, they might as well have been the menacing *ton* as he imagined it to be, but he had not attended Oxford like his father. He'd never made it that far after the family's holdings in the Indies failed and most everything was sold. Those who remembered his family tragedy would certainly not trouble themselves to speak with him unless they were in need of a man with a dependable ship for one reason or another.

Thomas searched the ladies on the fringes of the crowd as dancers moved in formation around him. Some laughed, some looked solemn, and many of them were older or certainly wed. Across the room, a most glamourous young woman in an ethereal gown captured his attention. The gleaming white dress with a suggestion of lavender beneath it had golden embroidery on the sleeves. It matched the tight curls pinned up high on her crown. A few wisps trailed down her fair neck making her look like royalty. He assumed she was with the governor's party, but when she turned with a smile illuminating her face, he saw a flash of cerulean eyes, and his heart fell to his boots. Felicity Barrow was quite the sight.

"You appear to have been distracted by another potential partner I see," murmured Mrs. Coker from beside him.

Thomas touched his jaw as if he wasn't aghast to be caught staring and took a deep breath releasing the tension between his shoulders. "I am only surprised to see her dancing with Lieutenant Shirley," grunted Thomas, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Why, she cannot dance with her brother, and she is quite stunning, don't you think?"

"I suppose, but she's had a great deal of time to prepare."

Mrs. Coker flicked him on the arm with her fan. "Don't be selfish with your compliments, Doyle. Here she was hoping you would return in time."

"Was she?"

"She mentioned it."

This pleased Thomas a great deal, and smoldering ashes of hope threw up another spark. He never dared give a thought to marriage because he'd never met anyone who threatened to ignite him on fire like this. Yet a burn from this lady would be a most welcomed scar, he decided, and any attempt to win her worth the risk. At least he would know, and even if wounded, he was strong enough not to become sick in the head. He would not throw himself into the sea like Mama. That was how she had ended it. He swallowed with

anxiety.

"Of course Mr. Marsh asked her for the opening dance," Mrs. Coker reminded him in a quiet tone. Thomas was glad he'd missed that while Mrs. Coker looked about as if searching for the planter. "I suppose he will pursue a second dance later when things become merrier."

"A country dance you mean," Thomas said, annoyed at the thought of Marsh clasping Miss Barrow's hands and skipping around the room with her. Would she take off her gloves?

"You will dance tonight I hope," rallied Mrs. Coker, "even though it is a large ball. Be sure it is an unmarried lady, too, and not one sitting dolefully in the corner."

"She will not be in the corner tonight," Thomas mused aloud, still focused on Miss Barrow.

"No, she would not on any night. I have never seen a hint of self-pity that would dissuade her from performing her duties."

"Duties? Bah. I forget to smile and dance is a duty at things such as this." Thomas scowled. "No wonder I do not enjoy it as others do."

"She is the commander's sister, and her family sent her here with expectations, no doubt." Mrs. Coker eyed Mr. Marsh across the room as if to make a point and irritation scraped down Thomas's spine with invisible fingernails.

He shuffled his feet and gazed around the room as if uninterested. Then, as if to placate him, the music came to a pleasant crescendo, and Thomas watched the partners on the floor make their final bows and curtsies. The dancers broke up like a flock of gulls, and the clink of glasses punctuated the noisy air. He watched Miss Barrow disappear into the crowd and craned his neck to look over the heads of the other guests until he spotted her brother. Surely she would return to Fitz's side if she was not snatched up for the next dance.

Thomas's stomach clenched, and he wondered why he should feel so foolish and unsure. He knew his knots, how to reef a sail, where to swing his eyeglass, and how to hold a sextant, but on how to explain to Miss Barrow he'd reconsidered the marriage state and had simmering feelings for her, he was lost.

"Captain Doyle!"

His heart flew into his throat, and he turned to find the object of his perplexing obsession beside Mrs. Coker. Miss Barrow's cheeks

glowed as pink as bougainvillea petals, and her eyes glittered with enthusiasm.

"You have come after all."

"Obviously."

Her gaze dropped to his cravat, and she gave her head a little toss as if trying to shake off an irksome thought. "Well, you look quite the gentleman in this fine blue coat and hair pulled back just so."

He patted his head feeling self-conscious. The wiry locks were a beast to calm in the wind and rain, but he didn't always let them fly loose.

"Doesn't Miss Barrow look lovely? I helped create the gown," Mrs. Coker boasted.

"You did a fine job of it," Miss Barrow assured her with a modest smile. She glanced at Thomas with a faint question in her eye.

Of course, he could not tell her she looked like a princess. "I suppose," he agreed, wondering why his tongue felt thick. "It would look lovely on any woman."

She looked away, and he realized his error. He might as well have accused her of piracy again. "I mean," he corrected himself, as if she was in search of a compliment and if so why from him, "you look so handsome I thought you were someone else."

Mrs. Coker swung her chin up at him and widened her eyes with a scolding glare. Miss Barrow gave a dry chuckle. "Thank you, I think, but I'm afraid it's just me."

You dolt! Thomas realized his blunt approach was not going to win any hearts this evening or any other night. It was much easier to converse with Miss Barrow when they were chatting about swords, ships, the sea, or even sugarcane. He wondered briefly if his inability to bare his heart was from lingering remnants of his father's condemnations, or if observing Mama's pain had made him too afraid to unsheath any true feelings when it mattered most. Fervent emotions did no good at sea, and for most of his life, Thomas had little use for them on land, either.

To his relief, the musicians began to tune their instruments for the next dance, and he made himself relax. He took a deep breath, turned to find the ladies exchanging whispers, and met Mrs. Coker's gaze first. "I did promise you a dance," he said, committing treason by avoiding his promise to Miss Barrow. He had in fact, boldly suggested two.

Mrs. Coker gave him an impish grin. "I'm afraid I've already hounded down Lieutenant Shirley and obligated him to ask me. You'll have to prepare better than that."

Miss Barrow smiled at her friend's censure of him then looked away. Thomas's mind shouted at him not to risk asking, that she was probably already engaged, but his heart forced his mouth to open anyway. "And you, Miss Barrow, are you taken for this dance, too?" he wondered in a careless tone.

She swung back to face him, and a narrow curl twisting down to her earlobe danced along her smooth cheek. "I am not," she said, as if disappointed her card was not full.

"There you go then!" cheered Mrs. Coker, and she took flight through the crowd like a bird in a hurry to find its next meal.

Miss Barrow grinned at Thomas as if this was funny, and he wondered where all of his confidence had gone. He watched her pink cheeks darken, and she rocked on her heels. Thomas swept the crowd around them, and seeing no one on the prowl for the sister of the *Pelican's* commander, held out a hand. His chest squeezed as his mind raced for a retort should she decline, but she gracefully took his arm with a delicate glove.

"Of course I cannot refuse you," she chuckled.

"You would hardly refuse anyone," he replied, knowing she was too proper and well-bred to do such a thing.

"Then you will have to do," she teased.

At least he hoped she was teasing.

They took up their positions, and facing her, Thomas forced himself to relax and enjoy her companionship in the company of others. It was not too difficult to do once he forgot about everyone else. He held her eye as they touched hands and circled one another, arms brushing, and he wondered how he had ever sparred with her in the garden or sat beside her on the settle to talk about personal things without feeling such intimacy and connection. It seemed like a string was winding around them, pulling them closer together, then her gloved fingers went around his, and he felt a blast of something akin to gunpowder shoot up his arm. It burned him all over from his empty chest to his thick clumsy toes.

Miss Barrow did make him feel like a gentleman, Thomas thought. Sometimes she treated him almost brotherly, other times as an endearing friend, but then there were times like this when she did not break their locked eyes while he explored her skin and her

shape and her colors. The scent of jasmine and a tickle of lime rippled past him when she turned and exposed the back of her neck, and Thomas braced himself at the shocking impulse to kiss it and savor what he inhaled whenever she stood close to him. She found his eyes again, and he was sure he was reddening and foolish-looking. His boot scuffed across the floor threatening to trip him up, and he squeezed her hand as he caught himself.

"We aren't in the courtyard, Doyle," she teased under her breath, and he thought he heard a quiet giggle. "There are no loose bricks to blame if you lose your footing."

"I am all unbalanced," he admitted in a murmur.

She glanced at him as she brushed past. A tiny smile lifted the corner of her lilac lips. "You are used to swaying to and fro aboard a brig and now the earth is still." She moved a step closer than necessary, and the other dancers around them became a blur. The music was a faraway echo. Thomas resisted the urge to rest his lips on her forehead, and reminded himself wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her into him were quite impossible here.

A bolt of light struck his mind, and he nearly stumbled again when it showed him the truth. This was not wrong. Or wicked. Nothing was impossible or improper to share with her if she were his wife. *Mama. You were so unhappy.*

Thomas suddenly knew how much Mama had loved him; how much she had endured for his sake until she couldn't bear it anymore. She would want him to be happy. Of course she would want him to have the love she'd always craved and been denied in her advantageous marriage. His throat tightened, and he blinked rapidly to maintain his composure. Could he really have something magical and enduring with Miss Barrow?

She met him again on the ballroom floor, reached out, and he met her upraised glove and whirled with her under the candlelight as their forearms touched, softly, like the whisper of the lightest breeze on the hottest afternoon. To his utter happiness, Thomas watched Miss Barrow's eyes darken with streaks of jade, and he lost himself in their depths. Her gaze was a velvet cloak, showing him little peeks and fleeting glances of what laid inside, and he thought he knew her heart. Yes, she was no stranger to the ways of boys and men with her wild brothers and unfortunate time with the corsairs, but Miss Barrow still radiated a ravishing level of femininity beyond her patience and plainness and good humor.

"It is not that I'm too used to being at sea," he confessed in a low tone, hoping he could make her understand somewhat of what he felt. "I am unused to being on land and having the world rock around me like this."

She darted her gaze away as if thinking, and Thomas watched and waited for her to understand. When he took her elbow to circle her around, she peeked from the side of her eye at him, and he gave a gentle nod. Her cheeks reddened to scarlet, and he pressed her arm as if she needed his support.

The room spun lazily even though the dance was finished, and Thomas found himself frozen, forgetting entirely what he was to do while staring at the woman before him like a besotted fool. He saw it made her unsure, too, when a blush bloomed across her bosom and flowered up her neck. She dropped her gaze to the floor and curtsied, and like a buffoon, he made an awkward bow and tried to come out of his stupor by offering his arm. "Would you like to walk?" he asked hoarsely. "Outside?"

He didn't mean that he had intentions to secret her away out of sight of her brother or to do anything improper. He only wanted to talk, to explain, and tell her that his feelings about marriage had changed. More so, that he actually had feelings when he had never felt such complex ones before—honest and tender and even chaste, mixed with the promise of something more—a burning passion for other things unmentionable at this time. He found himself mincing the inside of his cheek.

Miss Barrow cleared her throat, and Thomas wondered if she felt as anxious as he. "I would like to very much," she admitted in a voice that betrayed a small quiver. "In fact—"

She was cut off by the sudden appearance of the elegant Mr. Marsh. An unpleasant dew shined on his forehead in the steadily warming room. He wore a brilliantly knotted cravat around his neck, and his waistcoat was cut from a glamourous violet silk that made Thomas look dull. His features were so fine, so aristocratic, that Thomas could not help but feel like a lumbering bull beside him.

"Miss Barrow," Marsh bowed. He gave Thomas a sly smile as if she was a treasure, and they should both share in her spoils. "I do believe we must have a second dance, and I can only suspect that you love a reel with all your youth and vigor."

She gave a small laugh and took his outstretched hand as if

Thomas had not just whispered something of a promise. "You are quite right, Mr. Marsh, and I do love a reel."

Marsh gave Thomas a dismissive bow. "Thank you for entertaining our little island sparrow," he dismissed him. "It was very kind of you, but I will take her off your hands for now."

Taken aback, Thomas felt his fists curl as if a corsair had sailed abreast of him with cannons at the ready. Before he could fire, the planter took Miss Barrow by the elbow and escorted her to the middle of the room where other gentlemen and ladies were lining up on opposing sides.

Off my hands? he wondered. *I don't need her off my hands any more than you need another distillery.* He watched them go, saw Miss Barrow make only one fleeting glance his direction, and then realized his mistake. She wanted a match. She wanted to go home. Marsh was the perfect fit. Thomas turned on his heel and strode to the far corner of the room, his mouth dry and heart reeling with sudden emptiness.



Chapter Fourteen



Felicity felt lightheaded when Mr. Marsh led her out to the floor. Waves of bliss washed over her as she embraced the music trilling around her. She knew she was smiling too broadly at her new partner, but it was impossible to contain. They clapped and laughed and skipped, and all the while she saw nothing but Thomas Doyle. Burly and wide, tall and handsome, and with his dark, billowy hair pulled taut, his dark mahogany eyes sent tremors from her heart to her toes every time she looked into them, but never more than tonight. He had returned, just as he'd promised, when he could be away at sea.

The sensation of him so close had made her feel safe and whole. Just watching his full lips move as he spoke softly to her in confidence made her burn from within, and his quiet breath against her ear turned her knees to pudding. She had gone from enjoying his company to craving it, and now that her wishes were satisfied she felt like a glow-worm.

This was no sisterly feeling. No friendly admiration. She respected Captain Doyle, she did, and she believed in him, too, but more than that, she adored nearly everything about him. He was not indifferent but shy. Not hesitant but careful. Not cold but commanding. She could not imagine existing at this very moment, on this island, at this ball, without him. She did not want to return to London. It held no appeal. Not without the captain. Not without Fitz. Not without the Cokers or Mrs. Harris; and not without azure waters and sugary sand. Certainly not without breadfruit and bougainvillea. And they still had a second dance. If he wanted it. Did Captain Doyle think of her as more than a friend? What had he meant by saying the world seemed to rock around him tonight?

Head and heart spinning, and anxious to see Captain Doyle again, Felicity barely finished her curtsy to Mr. Marsh when he

reached for her hand and kept it firmly in his own. She looked at him in surprise.

"Supper," he explained, and at that moment the doors at the back of the room opened to reveal tables heaped with steaming food.

"Oh! Already?" she stammered, looking about for Fitz. Perhaps the captain would come in search of her and take her in.

"My dear," said Mr. Marsh, patting her hand, "it has already struck one, and you look like you need rest. I've never seen your cheeks so flushed."

"Oh," Felicity jested, "a little exercise is good for the soul." Besides, her cheeks always glowed with color thanks in part to her ivory complexion. They showed everything just as Captain Doyle had noticed.

"Exercise? I must heartily agree," intoned Mr. Marsh in a thick voice. He stared, and Felicity gave a nervous chuckle, searching the room for Captain Doyle, but her partner held her wrist in his and there it remained until she was seated.

They ate and laughed with their dinner companions, until unable to disguise her anxiety any longer, Felicity excused herself to slip down the stairs to cool herself in the night air. Carriages came and went outside on the street. She wiped the back of her neck as she loitered on the steps for a time. Seeing neither Fitz nor the captain, she reluctantly returned indoors and crept into a room where an elderly chaperone was embroidering a fold of cloth. The woman looked up with a frown, irritated to be interrupted, and Felicity moved to the window and pressed her forehead to the panes to watch the activity in the street.

Had Captain Doyle returned to St. Christopher just for her? He'd offered to dance, but he'd also excused himself from any tutoring when he had to hurry off on another mission. It was beginning to feel like cruelty when Felicity could not see him at least weekly. She missed their lessons and their talks. The blasted bandits marauding the waters around the Indies were taking him away more and more. Soon, she could become so enamored of him she might throw her arms around his neck every time he walked into a room like Femy might do.

Enamored? Yes and no. Felicity pulled a little away from the windowpane to see her face in the reflection. She looked so young and yet old—but ready—to fall in love. She wet her lips and studied

her hungry eyes. No. Thomas did not want a wife. He'd said as much. He knew she needed a match, and he'd had every opportunity to offer and had not. Why had he danced with her the way he did? A flicker of movement in her reflection made her turn her head.

"Are you well? I was worried about you." Mr. Marsh had crept up behind her as stealthy as a cat. He inclined his head and studied her. Felicity turned to rest her aching back against the window. This would no longer do. He had a right to know that she had made up her mind. She had to be honest with herself and with him about what she wanted. *My*, she thought with amazement, *Femy was doing it right all along.*

"Mr. Marsh." Despite her determination, she heard a hitch in her voice. She shot a meaningful glance at the perturbed chaperone. The woman needed no more hints. She made a *harumphing* noise in the back of her throat and rose from her chair.

"Madam," said Mr. Marsh, making no effort to disguise his satisfaction that she had decided to take her leave.

"Mr. Marsh," the woman croaked then plodded from the room, pushing the door open all of the way until it touched the wall behind it.

At least they would not be left alone, thought Felicity with relief. Not that she didn't trust Mr. Marsh, but... "I'm glad you sought me out," she began. "I could not find my brother or Captain Doyle so—"

"You waited for me." Mr. Marsh seemed pleased.

Speechless, Felicity's mind fumbled for a way to correct his line of thinking. "I only needed to cool off and have a bit of calm."

Mr. Marsh looked over his shoulder as guests passed back and forth in the hall. "I suppose it is as quiet as one can find under the circumstances."

"Yes," she grimaced. "Pity there are no gardens or sandy paths nearby."

"I daresay I should not be out of doors with you on a night such as this." Mr. Marsh stepped closer. "Especially with how I feel and what I need to say."

Felicity's heart began to trot in an unsteady way. Her palms dampened. She slipped off her gloves to have something to do. An empty silence between them felt heavy with pressure. It was thick, and she did not like it. "Mr. Marsh," she began again, wondering

how on earth to put him off.

"Miss Barrow." Marsh took a step forward, nearly into her arms. She dropped them in surprise, but he reached for her hands and encircled them with long, slender fingers. All of him was long and thin; even his words. "You cannot imagine my happiness when you agreed to dance and dine with me tonight, what with all of the choices I know you must have. I enjoyed it even more than escorting you about the island to show you how things are done."

"You mean the plantations," she murmured, wondering how to tell him she did not think highly of the process of making sugar or rum. She did not approve of the human cost of dignity and freedom.

"Of course I mean the plantations," he smiled. "That is what St. Christopher is all about, as is all of the Indies. Agriculture. Wealth. Our rights as Englishmen." He squeezed her hand. "You see," he expounded, "I was sent here to examine the state of our books, the house, and the overseer, whom as you know I let go and hired another. There is a certain way things must be done; properly and in order, and though I have set my family business to rights, it has," he said with emphasis, "helped me see there is more to be found in the Indies for those with foresight and a little good fortune."

"Is there?" Felicity's mind whirled.

"Why, yes. You, my dear, have a lovely parcel in the hills just northeast of town. Sugar Hill." He gave her a little smile. "You have heard what I have done with Marsh Winds. Imagine what we could make of your derelict old jungle together."

"Together?" Felicity tried to sound profoundly curious, hoping against hope that he was not implying what she presumed. "I thought you did not like it here, that you wanted to go home."

"Only because I suspected you felt the same, but consider it. Can you imagine the income from *two* working plantations? My mama would be beside herself. Already I have sent funds for her to refurbish our manor in York, but of course, after she's gone it would be yours to do with as you wish."

"Your home in the moors." Felicity realized she was stupidly repeating the man with nothing but questions.

"That's right." An affectionate smile creased his lips. "We Marshes are not desperate for every season in London, but the house and family need a woman, a *young* woman, a new mistress," he sang, "to walk its halls. That is, after we clear Sugar Hill and plant more crops." He drew her hand up to his lips, and she

suspected with some aversion that he would kiss it.

She dragged her eyes up to meet his penetrating gaze. "Oh, Mr. Marsh," she quavered, "I'm—"

The man dropped to his knee right before her, so close he could bury his face into the folds of her muslin. Felicity sucked in a breath of surprise. Blood roared into her ears, and her storming pulse became deafening. Her hand felt damp in his, but still, he held on tight. His smile stretched from ear to ear.

"You must do me the honor," Mr. Marsh insisted, "of admitting fate has dealt us a great and generous hand. Here I was sent. Here you have come. Together we can return to England in triumph, wed as husband and wife—friends and lovers," he smiled, "and someday soon, the very woman to make my mama a grandmother as she has long hoped and prayed."

Felicity bumped against the window at her back, and she wondered how much of her weight it would take before she pushed herself through the glass. Sticky, unpleasant heat rolled down her stomach, her thighs, and she braced her ankles to keep from collapsing onto the floor.

"My mama will adore you," Mr. Marsh continued. "She has never found any of my attachments worthy of me, but I have assured her in every way that you are as pure and sweet as a spring sunrise and the most proper and elegant of all women although you are here. How proud she will be," he added, as if unable to stop himself, "for her bachelor son to come home wed to a baron's daughter and with two plantations instead of one."

Felicity suddenly felt like a purser's list. This was not right. It was certainly not love. She tore her gaze away from the man at her feet, hoping beyond hope Fitz would rush in. Instead, she found a crowd of revelers at the door, watching the scene in the room unfold with their mouths agape. Mr. Marsh did like an audience, and he still had her hand. She tried to draw away, but he tightened his grip, his smile stiffening.

"Oh, Mr. Marsh," she wheezed. She pulled, and he pulled back. She dropped her other hand against her side. "Mr. Marsh," she stammered. Oh! This was all wrong. It looked wrong. It felt wrong. No, it felt sickening. She was going to be sick. What to do? To refuse him would be scandalous, to accept him would be to live a lie. *Oh Femy!* thought Felicity, *how did you do it?*

"Easy, silly," she imagined her sister's voice explain. "I felt what I

said, and I said what I felt." The only thing Felicity felt were her numb lips as if someone else was speaking. "I'm sorry, Mr. Marsh, I cannot marry you."

He wavered like a statue about to topple over. Someone very uncouth giggled from the doorway. "I'm sorry, what?" His hold on her loosened.

Felicity twisted her hand and slipped it away. "I said I am most sorry. How it pains me to have to... refuse... at this time." She thought she would melt into the floor.

Mr. Marsh crawled up to his feet with his face blazing and tugged on his cravat. Shock and offense glowed in his sharp blue eyes. "I have already spoken to your brother," he said in a strangled tone. His cheeks looked pale.

"I am sorry," Felicity repeated, "I feel wretched. I did not know. He should have told me, discussed it with me."

"But you are here to find a match. A husband." Mr. Marsh looked over his shoulder. "Desperate, in fact," he said in a voice that lofted through the air.

Felicity thought she would lose her dinner. "I am not desperate," she insisted. "I am here to live with my brother, and if I am wed that is my business." She lowered her eyes and tried to fortify her nerves so her voice did not crackle. "Frankly sir, it is no one else's."

"Well, of all the wasted time," Mr. Marsh blurted in a cutting tone. "Of course it is your family's business, and your duty, Miss Barrow."

Expectation. Words like hot irons. Just like the ton. Only all of the censure was on Felicity now. Poor Femy. How wrongly Felicity had judged her sister. The boys tended to do as they wished, but with so many of them, Femy and Felicity had somehow become of a mind to do so also. Was it wrong? Marrying Mr. Marsh might be the proper thing to do for the Barrows and Mr. Marsh, but it wasn't fitting for Felicity. She swallowed, and her dry throat nearly cracked.

A few of the observers glided into the room waiting for more. Felicity glanced over and saw Mrs. Sanford. She looked strangely pleased and full of pity at the same time. A few paces behind her in the hall, Captain Doyle stood staring at the scene as if he had stopped on his way outside. His eyes looked far away and distant like dark caves. He saw Marsh was proposing, and he thought she would say yes!

Felicity's heart flew out of her chest and took her air with it, but Captain Doyle swept past the door with a determined stride as if he did not want to interrupt her. Her bosom caved in with pain, and she thought she would faint. It felt like a stack of cannonballs had landed on her.

Mr. Marsh gave her a scalding glare that matched his unfriendly tone when she returned her attention to him. "You, Miss Barrow, led me to believe..."

She clutched her hands. "I am sorry, sir," she whispered, feeling quite ashamed. "I have not considered you as more than a friend." Her face and neck burned like someone had covered her in oil and lit a match. She should have been more clear when Mr. Marsh called, or better, refused his company from the moment her thoughts and feelings were at odds.

"Sorry?" The gentleman wielded a look of disbelief. "You should be." He inclined his head like a disappointed father then gave a calloused laugh while looking back over his shoulder. Felicity trembled at the threat in his tone.

"My mama wrote only a fortnight ago," Mr. Marsh announced, "and warned me about your family, yet here I stand doing the honourable thing. Do you really think anyone else will have you? Not in London, to be sure."

"My - my family?" Felicity stuttered with growing alarm. Surely he did not know, had not heard.

"Your brother, Lord Barrow, is a gambling fool, and your sister?" he hissed, "All of London knows she eloped." His blue eyes hardened like flint. "With a servant!"

The room gasped. Mr. Marsh glanced at Mrs. Sanford. "I understand she's with child or was. I suppose you are an aunt," he informed Felicity coldly.

His lovely blue eyes looked like glaciers now, and his words felt like a knife in her back. Felicity's knees rattled. Her gentleman acquaintance. Her caller and friend. He did not seem so proper now. Her mind spun for excuses and grace. "If I were an aunt I am certain I would have received word before you, sir," she stammered, "and I assure you I will be overcome with joy for my sister when that time comes."

"You would be," Mr. Marsh replied. He smoothed his pristine breeches as if she'd made him muss his clothes. What a turncoat, Felicity thought furiously, one moment dowsing her with

compliments and the next throwing gossip at her like buckets of venom. Was this proper society? Was this how it was done?

He looked down his nose and gave a curt bow. "Miss Barrow. I'm sorry for taking up so much of your time. You are a befogged young woman, and I'm sorry to say, beneath my touch."

"Mr. Marsh!" The silky voice of Mrs. Coker sliced through the air. Felicity almost folded in relief when Mr. Marsh spun about in surprise. "How dare you insult Miss Barrow and in such a public way!" she shamed him.

"Well, I," he fumbled, hands swinging at his sides.

"You what? Intend to spread vicious rumors? Cast a lady your heart then make a cake of yourself when you are so politely declined?

"Her family, madam, has—"

"What has her family done?" Mrs. Coker demanded. She pretended to look around the room. "I do not see them here. What are they to you? If you were truly in love with the lady would you be parading your intentions before all of Basseterre? Would you insult her so only because she felt differently?"

Felicity's throat felt so parched she could hardly swallow. The eyes on her made her want to run from the room. Poor Mr. Marsh turned crimson in the face, and he looked into the hall again. Everyone's attention was on him now. Mrs. Sanford glared at him as if he'd put something sour in her mouth.

"Well," he said, his voice softening, "I see I have raised a breeze, Mrs. Coker, when I only hoped to have a word in private with Miss Barrow. Please accept my apology."

"It's not I who deserves the apology," she pointed out. "Should you have insulted me with skeletons from my cupboard you would be facing the end of my rapier."

"Er, yes, well." He flitted his gaze toward Felicity and gave a slight bow. "Good evening, Miss Barrow." The farewell seemed to sting his tongue.

Rather surprised and curious about Mrs. Coker's outburst, Felicity wished she did not have to worry about what was right or wrong and proper or improper anymore. "I thank you for your time and attention," she returned to Mr. Marsh instead of pummeling his ears. His lips rumpled as if she'd said something unpleasant. "Please give your mama my regards," she continued, realizing his mama had probably turned away every woman her son had ever fancied

and would continue to do so until she dropped dead. No wonder he wanted a wife from St. Christopher. No wonder he thought he needed Sugar Hill.

"Oh, and I will be sure to inform my family of her kindness in sharing our news with the entire Indies," Felicity added. She could not wait to tell Fitz what the Marshes had done, and what Mr. Marsh had said about Edward. What was her elder brother about now?

At this, Mr. Marsh grunted and spun about. The crowd of gawkers separated like the Red Sea to let him pass, and with a small smirk, Mrs. Coker dipped her chin at Felicity and followed him out. Some trailed after them, others remained watching Felicity as if she might crumple to the floor. Captain Doyle was nowhere in sight. He would have been aghast at the exchange. Perhaps she should have thrown a chair over Marsh's head!

Cheeks flaming, Felicity turned back to the window with a heart at full gallop as her stomach roiled with nausea. Is this what it felt like to be censured for making one's own choice and ignoring what was expected in society?

A few snickers from the hallway filled the room. Felicity grabbed the edge of the window to steady herself and willed the onlookers to melt away. Through the glass, she found the moon and imagined it looking down over meadows and gardens somewhere far away, shining through a window onto her sister who sat thinking about her and wondering why she hadn't written.

Oh, no, Felicity agonized, *I have outdone even Femy! I have shamed Fitz and our family by refusing a sensible and proper match, and in public, too!* Felicity's hands felt empty, and she squeezed them wishing Captain Doyle was at her side. Was he still in the building or had he escaped back upstairs to a card room so as not to interrupt the proposal he thought she wanted? Perhaps being kidnapped by pirates was not a scandalous thing to him, but a scene of such intimacy and shame would be.

She locked her jaw to keep back a sniffle. He had rescued her, become her friend, and danced with her in a way that made her feel loved and adored. Special. Wanted. And not for any reasons that had to do with dowries or titles or reputations.

"Mr. Marsh is a complete cad for putting me in such a position and spreading my secrets," she mumbled under her breath. "I'd have half a man like Thomas Doyle before accepting someone so cruel.

He's honourable and fair and a thousand times more handsome. Why, he makes me..." Through the glass, the moon blurred her tears. "Why Mr. Marsh is not in love with me, but I am in love with Captain Doyle, no matter how he feels about the matter!"



Chapter Fifteen



After the dance with Miss Barrow nearly left him undone, Thomas forced himself to find another partner to dance with as if he did not mind she was in Marsh's arms again. He fled the ballroom as soon as the reel ended. It took every bit of decorum he had not to stalk out and head to the wharves for something distracting to do like drown himself in the water.

He sauntered past one room after another looking for an escape. At least he could sit in a corner somewhere and play cards. Not that he wanted to gamble. He kept a tight rein on his limits, only doing enough to mingle with friends and acquaintances when he didn't want to dance, and he didn't. No, that wasn't true. He didn't want to watch Miss Barrow dance with anyone else.

Overwhelmed with blistering nerves that seared his innards, Thomas wandered rows of other rooms where games and smoking temped the less social. Blast Fitz Barrow for promising Sugar Hill to him at all! The only way for Thomas to get his hands on it now would be to trap his sister, who was in such a rush to wed she would settle for the first pandering slob who pursued her. Marsh would never sell Sugar Hill. Thomas was sure of it. And he could never trap a woman like his papa did Mama.

He cursed under his breath. What had he been thinking flirting with Miss Barrow in the middle of the ballroom? Worst of all, it had been more than flirting. It'd felt honest, naked, and undisguised. Had she noticed? Understood? The moment Marsh appeared at her side, Miss Barrow seemed to forget all about Thomas. She'd been as completely unaffected as he was spellbound.

What an oaf he was. Now that he'd turned some massive corner in his life, made the decision not to torture himself and suffer like his mama in memory of her, he wanted to think about someone at his side, in his bed, giving him children and a chance to have a real

family. Unfortunately, the only woman that appealed to him was his very good friend's sister who needed a proper match, money if possible, and someone who would ferry her back to England. It wouldn't be Doyle.

Thomas realized three sets of eyes had turned his way as if hearing his thoughts. Fitz's Lieutenant Shirley was seated at one of two round tables in a room with a pair of gentlemen lower in the politico pecking order. They looked in want of a fourth player. Thomas squeezed past a heavy bookcase and *flumped* down beside the lieutenant. He smiled engagingly at the other players and reached into his pocket.

"We were hoping someone would come along," said one of the others, chewing on an unlit cheroot. "How is the dancing?"

"It's growing hot, and everyone's hungry. They opened the doors for dinner," Thomas informed him.

"Yes, I escaped right away," admitted Lieutenant Shirley. "Courses at all hours of the night pound away on my innards."

The other man snorted over his cards. "That's because you're fed nothing but weevilled biscuit, young fellow." The pair of friends snickered. Thomas pretended no lady was on his mind but stretched out, crossed his boots under the table, and watched the cards as they were dealt.

"I've eaten ship's biscuit my whole life, and it has done me no harm," he declared. "Meanwhile half the Indies has gout or other complaints."

Lieutenant Shirley chuckled. The new acquaintances shrugged in agreement. Their rotund bellies protruded behind their waistcoats and suggested they had eaten very little ship's biscuit throughout their careers.

Finally distracted, Thomas focused on his numbers and took chances with luck. The officer and he won match after match much to his gruff delight. It snuffed out the ache that pulled on his heartstrings every time he heard music, laughter, and the footfalls of merry dancing. Of course, Miss Barrow would be back on the ballroom floor. She was too enchanting to ignore this night and had the backing of the very influential Cokers. Her heart was as free as a bird to choose whom she pleased. The only problem was he was not an option.

An opponent slapped down a winning card, and Thomas grunted at his loss of momentum. Again, Miss Barrow was making his mind

race in too many directions causing him to make foolish choices. He was glad he had set his limits before the game. The table knew he would not be incited into betting more than he could easily afford. Thomas Doyle was no real gambler, and he would never be a drunk like his father.

A messenger, a young boy that should have been abed, dashed into the room and to their table with such quickness Thomas thought at first it was a slinky mongoose. The boy eyed Lieutenant Shirley, made a stiff salute, and in a fatigued voice uttered, "The captain needs to see you, Sir, straight away."

Thomas leaned forward, palms on the table. Fitz Barrow needed his second? "What's afoot?" The boy darted his gaze between Lieutenant Shirley and Thomas but said nothing. Instead, he remembered something and dug in a pocket before pulling out a small piece of paper folded in half and stuck together with wax. Thomas eyed it warily. Lieutenant Shirley stood up, pulled it from the boy's hand, and moved over to a window although it was as dark as pitch out.

The other players hummed impatiently and counted their notes then the fat one finally lit his cheroot. The floorboards vibrated as stomping commenced from another merry dance down the hall. "Miss Barrow must be exhausting herself," Thomas muttered. He realized he'd spoken out loud and looked up to find the gentlemen smirking.

"If you wait it out you can sneak home," the other said pleasantly. "I gave up dancing years ago."

"We play until my lady falls over," the other chuckled.

Thomas didn't bother to point out he wasn't married, not even engaged. How odd would that be, or would it be nice? Engaged to Miss Barrow. They could see each other as much as they wished. Perhaps she would call him Thomas instead of Captain or Doyle. He liked that idea, but he stopped himself from any more woolgathering. He'd done enough of that at sea, and now he was dressed like a dandy dancing quadrilles with Miss Barrow imagining he was in love.

What had become of him since she'd crashed a chair over his head? Lud. Maybe he was. He'd already decided he would like to marry her if he could. A hand landed on his shoulder, and he snapped his head up.

Lieutenant Shirley gave him a secretive look. "Perhaps you

should come with me."

"Sounds like trouble," Thomas breathed. They apologized to their companions and stepped into the hall as the diminutive messenger shot past them and down the stairs. "Is everything okay?" Thomas pressed the lieutenant in a low voice.

The officer leaned close. "I can't say other than Commander Barrow has received word that has sent him off to Brimstone Hill."

Thomas tensed. With the island tending to change hands between Britain and France repeatedly, and the Brimstone Hill fortress the most reliable defense, he knew Fitz would not have been summoned unless something was afoot in the Indies. He hurried out with stiffness in his jaw, but this time for a different reason. Down the stairs, he nearly tripped over his feet when he hurried past an open room on his way out. There in the corner against a window, he spied Miss Barrow nearly in Marsh's arms. She looked most serious, and her cheeks blazed with color.

Thomas tripped to a stop, his heart diving like a seabird but hurtling into the floor instead of the water. She looked far more intimate with Marsh than she'd ever been with him. A nauseating swell crashed into Thomas, and he hurried away, trying to shrug off the final blow of what he'd suspected when she'd forgotten about their dance.

There were more important things. Fitz needed him. So did the sea. Thomas secured a mount and threw himself astride. They hurried through the streets with its hooves echoing off the shops and taverns. Thundering west along the bay over packed soil and sand, Thomas noticed other movement toward the hill with its great number of cannon. His mind bounced back and forth between Miss Barrow in Marsh's arms and the captured pirate he'd interviewed.

He forced himself to think only of Mr. Walsh. The foul pirate had warned there were whispers among his ilk, and Thomas had ignored him completely. He'd been distracted—by ghosts and dinners and balls. Once he reached the steep steps to the fortress, he handed his reins to a boy half his age and sprinted for a circle of officers milling under the limestone Romanesque arches. "Have you seen Commander Barrow?" he asked in an urgent tone, and one of them motioned inside.

Thomas brushed past them into a room and found Fitz looking over a map uncurled across a table and pinned down with lanterns at the corners. He wondered if Fitz knew what his sister was up to

at the ball but decided it was not for him to tell. Instead, Thomas moved beside his friend, heart still dashing. "What is it?" he whispered, rebelling against the fact he was no naval officer or marine for that matter. A ship was a ship, and he could sail the *Defiant* as well as any commodore could maneuver a man-o'-war.

"Oh, you're here," Fitz acknowledged, just as Lieutenant Shirley rushed up to them out of breath. He motioned with his chin toward the charts after saluting his officer. "It is not that urgent. Only word from Fort Charles that a fishing boat narrowly escaped being seen by a flotilla of ships gathered and becalmed as if in conference."

"Colors?" demanded Thomas with a furrowed brow.

"That's just it," said the lieutenant. "Some flew no colors, others... black." He let the weight of his words sink in.

"Pirates?"

Fitz nodded. "We suspect so unless the French are up to their old games."

"I can't believe they'd ignore the treaty."

"With the reports of increased pirate activity in our waters, I suspect you're right. It's a small buccaneer navy with some mad scheme."

Thomas nearly laughed. "What do they possibly think they can do in the Leewards with their small numbers?

"Precisely," mused Fitz. "There ain't many these days, just a few looters and the grimy lot who stay close to the cays with fast ketches so they can disappear quickly."

"They must be up to something," Lieutenant Shirley insisted.

"With our presence at sea, there's hardly a safe time or place to pillage and plunder."

"Perhaps they are joining forces to rid themselves of gun sloops and privateers getting in the way of their business," suggested Thomas.

Fitz motioned toward the fortress's officer in command. "Word is on its way to the rest of the Leewards, but it's been a day and a half since they were spotted floating aimlessly around Fishbone Cay."

"Something to be concerned about for certain," reiterated Lieutenant Shirley.

"Yes," agreed his commander. "Something to watch out for at least." He leaned toward Thomas and his lieutenant. "The Navy has swept the Leewards, but they were warned, I suspect." He grimaced. "For the time being, the channels and cays in our waters are of

concern as I know of no threat to our islands."

"They wouldn't dare approach Sandy Point," surmised Lieutenant Shirley.

"With Brimstone Hill fortress and Fort Charles? No," agreed Fitz. "It's the cays and small settlements I'm concerned about. Perhaps smaller Nevis."

"Do you want me to ready the *Defiant*?" Thomas asked. It was clear there was no immediate threat, but he yearned to sail as far away from the ball as possible.

Fitz bobbed his chin up and down. "Until I receive orders from higher up, I recommend it. You have more firepower than I, and the *Pelican* is lighter and swifter in rounding a coastline so I'll stay nearby."

"How many ships were there?" wondered Thomas.

"At least a half dozen," Fitz replied, "but different rates and tonnage. We only need to be on guard is all, but I do want to spread the word." He looked around. "Sorry to pull you all from the ball."

Thomas clapped him on the shoulder. "You know the *Defiant* will rove where you cannot go. The southernmost cays and merchantmen will be safe. You can depend upon it."

Fitz thanked him then departed to speak to the fortress's superior officers. Thomas gave Lieutenant Shirley a sharp dip of the chin then backed out of the room inhaling smoking lamps and the excitement of possible action. The soldiers were beside themselves and had forgotten all about the dancing and games they were missing. Even he was flooded with anticipation, a raw sort of joy mixed with relief. Here was something he could do, something important and distracting from his earlier anxieties. There was more than his purse or his heart at stake—the safety of others could be in jeopardy.

Thomas could think of no better cause to drag him away from the ball. No better reason to chance another meeting with Felicity Barrow. Perhaps it was best, he thought, to let these imaginations go. She had charmed him, that was all, and he'd fallen under an enchanting spell. It only meant he was ready to move forward, to open his heart to a woman. Someday. It could not be her.

The image of Miss Barrow conversing intimately with Marsh in the empty room of the customs house made his stomach turn over again, and somewhere his mother's spirit rolled across the island and warned him, calling him back. There was nowhere safe in life

but the sea. Love was treacherous, living was perilous, but the sea treated every man just the same if you knew her, and she never betrayed your heart.



FELICITY KEPT TO THE small room at the ball until Mrs. Coker fetched her with news Fitz had departed without her. Horrified to be left alone and shamed before half the town, Felicity nearly fled into the streets to escape, but the Cokers insisted she take their carriage. She reached the cottage in tears, burst past Mrs. Harris refusing any help, and locked herself in her room. Her mind circled around Mr. Marsh's proposal, her dance with Captain Doyle, the crowd of onlookers gasping at Mr. Marsh's revelations, and the captain fleeing the scene from the hall.

She tossed in her bed miserably, her head pounding in the back of her skull. It seemed like hours later when she finally heard the front door clap shut. Fitz. Felicity's candle was still flickering, and with a grimace, she waited. Within a few minutes, he brushed his knuckles across the outside of her door then pushed it open.

"Flick?" he whispered.

She sat up tiredly, too exhausted to brace her shoulders for accusations. "It's almost dawn." She said it simply. She was too tired to argue with him.

He ran his fingers through his hair as he crossed the room and fell onto the end of her bed. A patch of stubble shadowed his jaw. "I know, and I'm sorry. There was business at the fort, and I had to hurry away."

"Without letting me know?" This time she couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice, and she didn't care if she sounded like a fishwife. Perhaps Mr. Marsh's behavior would have been more contained if Fitz had been there.

He inhaled loudly and blew it out through his nose. "It was important, Flick, and even now I must ready to sail." He slanted his head and studied her. "What are you still doing up? Did you enjoy your time at the ball?"

Felicity stiffened and pulled the bedcover up to her neck. "You mean you do not know?" she rasped.

"Know what?" His brow furrowed.

Felicity pushed the covers away and crawled down to the end of the bed to join him. "Oh Fitz," she exclaimed, clutching his

shoulder, "Mr. Marsh proposed!"

His eyes widened. "Did you say yes?"

"Of course I did not say yes!"

Fitz wrinkled his face in bewilderment.

Against her will, Felicity began to weep. "I do not love him, and it was too soon and then he became insistent, but I was rude, and then," she prattled on, "can you believe it, but he knew about Femy? He accused me of having a sister who eloped with a servant in front of everyone. His mother heard about it, the meddlesome gossip, and she wrote him and warned him about us."

Fitz's brow furrowed. "But he proposed anyway."

"Only because he wants Sugar Hill!" Tears surged down Felicity's cheeks in steady streams, and concerned, Fitz slung an arm around her.

"He lied, Fitz," she cried. "He made me believe he wanted to return to England, but I believe he wants more land and wants to stay. I think he likes it here without his mother."

"With a mama like that, I'm sure he does." Fitz looked grim. "I never liked him a great deal, Flick, but you seemed to, and he had all of the right qualifications."

"He's a complete scoundrel and not the good kind."

Fitz chuckled and took her into a brotherly embrace. "Is there a good kind of scoundrel then?"

Felicity immediately thought of Captain Doyle, who was not a scoundrel, but only brave and assertive and spoke in plain truths. She wiped her wet cheek on Fitz's shoulder, and he did not complain. "Well, like Captain Doyle, I mean. I thought he was a pirate at first, and a cad, but then we became friendly, and now, I do like him very much. I mean I... I suppose I love him, truth be told."

Fitz pulled away and stared at her with round eyes. "It's true? You've fallen in love with Doyle?"

"I'm pretty certain."

"You mean as in shackledom?"

"Yes."

His shoulders slumped. "Lud, Felicity."

She nodded miserably. "I know. He doesn't want a wife. He had a miserable childhood and thinks marriage is cruel."

"Yes, as far as I know." Fitz sighed. "That's quite unfortunate unless you think you can change his mind. He does seem fond of

you."

"Not fond enough," she squeaked. She rested her head back on his shoulder. "Mr. Marsh said something about Edward, too. That he was gambling too oft or something of the like." She felt her brother brace himself and raised her head. "Fitz? Is it true?"

Fitz took her hand but would not meet her gaze. "Lud, Flick. I thought you at least suspected it, and anyhow, I didn't want to trouble you with it after what Femy had done."

Felicity straightened. "What has Edward done, Fitz?"

He crushed his mouth together in a tight line and exhaled. "Well, the thing is, they wrote that Sugar Hill was to be your dowry because the rest of it, the money, it's gone."

"My settlement?" Felicity exclaimed. How had they expected her to catch a husband without a sizable dowry especially after Femy's elopement? Anger surged up her throat. "Edward gambled away my future?"

After a moment of silence, Fitz nodded. "Not only that, but I'm also sorry to tell you," he muttered, "he's lost nearly everything, even the town house."

"What!" Felicity felt the blood drain from her cheeks.

"He's spent nearly everything. Mama and Genny have returned to Worcester. The twins have stayed in town, and George hopes to purchase a commission in the calvary."

"Of all the cheek!" Felicity nearly shouted. "They sent me across the sea to find a husband without anything to settle and are doing nothing to help themselves." She sucked in a ragged breath. "What man wants to marry me with nothing but a crumbling old plantation house to my name?" Hot tears pooled in her eyes, but Felicity blinked them away. She shook her hand out of her brother's hold.

"Marsh did not mind," Fitz reminded her. "He knew of it and still offered."

"He's proud as a peacock," Felicity decreed.

"Well, perhaps someone else will, too."

"Doubtful." Felicity could not help but think of Captain Doyle. He did not seem concerned with scandal or dowries. Did he know she was poor? She closed her eyes in agony remembering Mrs. Coker's words: *"He tends to avoid society whenever he can unless there are games afoot, and by games, I mean chances for prizes at sea he can hoard like a magpie."* Felicity saw she had nothing besides the ruins

of a house that he hated to tempt him. It wasn't enough.

"I have outdone Femy, Fitz. I refused Mr. Marsh after letting him court me. I was captured by pirates and skirmished with a privateer who was trying to save my life. I have no mother or lady's companion here, and I've been taking fencing lessons from Captain Doyle."

"Femy would be proud of you, and I am, too."

"Yes, she probably would be," Felicity sniffled, "but my chances are ruined, and I am a penniless spinster now. Fitz, I think I must go home. You are too busy to worry about me, and here I've caused you so much trouble."

He laughed. "You're no trouble, Flick, except when you get all dramatical. You just mustn't mind my coming and going or forgetting you need to be chaperoned and all that stuff."

"Mr. Marsh's gossip will get out. I *will* be ruined if I'm not already."

"This is not London, Flick, and besides, it doesn't bother me," her brother assured her. "Basseterre can say whatever they want about you or Femy, and they can say it to the barrel of my dueling pistol."

Felicity gave a quiet sigh. "I will have to think it over," she murmured, "but in my heart, I know what I must do. It's time to return to Worcester. I cannot stay after all. It was inevitable the Barrows would have a spinster. There are so many of us, you know."

"Flick," Fitz replied, "it's time you quit worrying about everyone else and consider what's best for you. I have never seen you so unhappy since you decided to grow up. I will send you home if you wish to go, but for once in your life, make the decision for yourself and not to please Mama or the rest of England."



Chapter Sixteen



Felicity endured a sense of growing loneliness when Fitz's orders took him away week after week seemingly with no end. Since the ball, Captain Doyle was nowhere to be seen, either, and she wondered if he'd heard the river of gossip that had flooded the ballroom and then leaked out into the streets of Basseterre, mingled in the marketplace, seeped into the church, and last of course, crept into her very own home where Mrs. Harris averted her eyes and cleared her throat a great deal.

Captain Doyle did not come for any more lessons but disappeared over the sea just like Fitz. This time, the captain did not stop by to explain or say goodbye. He had to know Felicity was ruined and there was no dowry besides Sugar Hill. She felt the censure of the whole Indies around her, and it was a small world, much smaller than London where not every stranger knew her name or circumstances.

She sat as dull as death in the small parlor almost every day shifting uncomfortably in her seat, for Fitz had not updated the furnishings as it had been so delicately hinted. Now, thanks to Mr. Marsh, she was not quite as celebrated or admired as before the ball. Who, she wondered, would want a woman who had not captured anyone's attention after three seasons, sailed practically alone across the world, was captured by pirates, and then refused a sensible offer from one of the most respected gentlemen on St. Christopher?

Felicity knew she had made a spectacle of herself in the sitting room at the ball, and of course, Mr. Marsh had heaped his own helping onto her as well. Why did the man think a proposal in public was a sensible if not romantic thing to do? Was it because she had so readily accepted his request for two dances?

She glanced at the thick folded envelope across the room, well-

worn and spotted with water. Another letter from Femy had arrived the day before, but Felicity could not bring herself to open it. She told herself she could not bear hearing from her foolish sister again, but it was a lie. She did want to hear from her family, especially Femy, but hearing of her happiness while the rest of the family burned in the ashes of her actions seemed quite unfair.

"Here I have tried to do everything right," Felicity murmured, "but I am no better off than Femy." Only Femy had what she wanted.

Felicity sucked in her bottom lip and held her breath. Femy had behaved improperly on more than one occasion, and she was happy as a lark. Felicity had tried to do everything right, and what was her reward? The unconscionable Mr. Marsh and a public scandal. Bitterness burned her throat. What was Femy's surprise? Had Mr. Marsh ruined the news? Was Felicity really an aunt? To think, there was another Barrow!

She bolted up, snatched the letter, and returned to her perch on the settle. It might as well be read. Mrs. Harris had delivered it to her, and Fitz would ask about it when he came home. Besides, she and her sister were practically in the same boat now. Felicity slit the seal with the tip of her sewing needle and unfolded the sheets while her heart thrummed with anticipation.

Dearest Flick,

How the weather has changed with your sister and friend. I have not received any of your letters, and none more from Fitzwilliam. I must admit I am somewhat concerned, but you are far away, and I am not so easily found in my corner of the world. I daresay by now you have won the hearts of West Indies society and are engaged to the son of a duke or an earl. How I ache to hear what he is like and if he makes you happy!

You must know that my Peter overheard from the cook, who heard from a lady's maid, that you were to be matched with one of Fitz's good acquaintances, and that Mama and Lord Barrow are supremely pleased. Is it true? Is he titled? Peter says there are very rich planters there, some widowed and some ugly whom no one else wants.

Dear sister, you are too handsome and good-hearted for that. May I surprise you and be most grave? Please do not settle for my sake or the family. Not even Mama! I know you think me a rebellious, silly thing, but I plead with you not to wed anyone who does not make your heart burst into flame with every longing glance. Life is too fleeting and cruel not to marry for love!

Despite what people say, and they can talk until they turn green for all I care, a love match is a far better way to live your life than being uncomfortable, distressed, or bitter like so many of our friends. You must not mind Mama so much. You always have. We children are all she ever loved to do, and now that we have wings she knows not where to turn her heart with Papa gone to heaven.

Can you tell that I am much changed? Have you deduced my secret? I am growing round as a pumpkin from week to week. If you have not guessed it, I am to be a mother! No one at home knows as Mama decided I am not to endured for marrying a footman instead of the count, but I have also written to Fitzwilliam to tell him he shall be an uncle and hope he did not ruin my announcement.

Please do write and quiet my fears that darling Flick will never see me again. You must not fret about me. I am in love, truly, and free to laugh as often as I wish, take walks without gloves, and dance whenever I feel like it, although there is no instrument in this little place. I am incandescently happy and hope to hear soon that you have found the same joy. Peter sends his regards and hopes to meet you properly someday. Until that time, I am affectionately yours,

Mrs. Euphemia Stone

The splattering sound of rain eased, and Felicity realized the room was alit, the world a little brighter after the frightening storm the night before. The lingering morning shower was moving on, but her eyes were just as wet. She heard the cry of a coachman and prancing horses outside the stoop and panic seized her that a visitor had come; Mr. Marsh, perhaps, to allow her an opportunity to change her mind.

A tremble ran down her spine. Should she do it? Repair her ridiculous refusal for the family's sake? After all, it was everything she had come to St. Christopher for—a proper offer from a good gentleman who could take her home. Mr. Marsh wanted to stay for now, but perhaps he could send her on to England. She must correct her mistake, Felicity thought frantically. What did Femy know about finding a match? Felicity shamed herself at the ball, humiliated a suitor, and would never be able to return home if she didn't land a husband.

More sounds of voices and movement came from outside. Felicity prayed silently it was for the neighbor, but she heard a rap at the front door and Mrs. Harris's skirts swishing with determination through the hallway. Felicity squeezed the needle in

her hand and braced herself for Mr. Marsh's overbearing shadow. She glanced at Femy's happy words lying beside her and tried to find her courage along with words of apology and humility that would do.

Femy was happy, and she could be, too, if... Felicity remembered bashing a chair over Captain Doyle's head and dancing with him at the ball and flinched. Happy, wild Femy always followed her heart before she followed the rules. Perhaps following one's heart took more courage than she'd ever supposed. *I cannot marry for family. I must have love.*

Femy wasn't silly, Felicity knew, but brave in ways she could never be. Obedience and propriety... too much of them could not always be a good thing. Why, look at Mr. Marsh. He only lived for his mama!

The door creaked, and to her relief, it was not him. Instead, Mrs. Coker fluttered into the room with a cape billowing behind her like a train.

"There you are my darling girl!" Mrs. Coker flung off her bonnet and cap as if she could not bear them.

"Mrs. Coker! How happy I am to see you," Felicity cried, completely forgetting to maintain her poise. She felt her damp cheeks warm but prepared herself for the remonstrations of the good lady. It was better than facing Mr. Marsh for now.

Mrs. Coker took both her hands and squeezed them as she dropped beside her on the settle.

"How are you, Felicity?" she asked, her eyes tender with concern.

Felicity rubbed her lips together as her reply tangled in her throat. "I – I – Why, I am as well as ever," she began.

Her friend raised a perfect crescent brow. "You have not been seen, not anywhere. I have spoken to Mrs. Harris twice this week at the market, and she said you had a headache—both times."

"Yes, my head does ache when I think of going out. It's so hot," Felicity began.

"Oh, pish! It's nothing a walk along the shore or ride into the hills won't cure."

Felicity did not point out that she had no one to escort her.

"Now, now," continued Mrs. Coker in a soothing tone, "you must not mind that Mr. Marsh allowed his vanity to rob him of his pride." She sat back with a shrug. "The man's a fool to propose to a woman

half his age in public."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Felicity's heart thudded as she waited for her due.

Mrs. Coker pulled her head back in surprise. "My dear girl, if you do not love the man or like him enough to compensate for the lack of it, you are brilliant. Do you know how many women say yes to their first proposal and never live long enough to explore what they really desire?"

Felicity looked down at her hands.

"You had someone else in mind?" Mrs. Coker sounded hopeful.

"I don't know that I have done much exploring at all. I was sent here to make a respectable match." Felicity hesitated, feeling quite uncomfortable, then blurted, "I was sent to redeem my family because my sister absconded with a footman. It's like Mr. Marsh said. My brother has gambled away the family fortune, too."

"How distasteful to spread such horrid news," soothed her friend.

Felicity's eyes moistened again. "It's true. Mama said I must not return to London without a husband, and Fitz must let me stay until I do. How I have inconvenienced him."

"Do you want to go back to London?"

"Yes," stammered Felicity. "I mean, no. I don't know." She shuddered, unable to forget the image of Captain Doyle standing in the hall spying Mr. Marsh on his knee. She didn't even want a match for her own good, she'd only come to trick someone who did not know about her family.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Yet Captain Doyle had not criticized her one little bit for the machinations she had called her duty. Her heart sagged. "I must go home even if no one else makes an offer. I will just live with my eldest brother at the country house. I will be an old spinster," she sniffled, "and take care of my mama. My disappointed mama." A sob squeezed her throat, and she covered her face with her hands and made herself laugh at her unseemly outburst. "You must think me a fool to refuse Mr. Marsh under the circumstances, but I do not think I will mind being single for life."

She felt Mrs. Coker's hands on hers. "I don't think you a fool." The lady shrouded her in a comforting embrace. "Now see here. You are stronger than you think for refusing to settle. There is nothing wrong with a woman choosing not to marry if that is what she wants. Have courage and hold your head high. You had nothing to

do with your sister's scandal."

"How do I?"

"Felicity, if I worried what every single person in the world thought about my decisions I would never have been a dressmaker, never left Martinique, and never pursued the man I loved even though he was out of my reach."

Felicity drew in a breath of surprise. "You were a modiste?"

Mrs. Coker smiled. "You did notice that besides the genteel governor, most of the guests at the ball were not above my husband's standing." Felicity shook her head.

"My dear, I chose contrary to my family's wishes to become a modiste, because I loved it so, and it was not quite that low for us. How do you think I have such talent for gowns and fittings? But I met James, and despite my profession and lack of family rank, I pursued him, and I won!"

"You followed your heart," sniffled Felicity. "That's so brave, and no one..."

"Judged him? Cut him off?" Mrs. Coker shrugged. "We love each other too much to mind what others think. Besides, when he took his position on the assembly, it was a fresh start, and the rumors began to fade—on this island at least."

Mrs. Coker squeezed her again. "An iron backbone and ability to give a good party will do that. You can be brave and follow your heart, too, Felicity, and still be proper and seemly. Don't let the world tell you who you are, darling, for it can seldom make up its mind, and it's usually wrong. That is the only sure thing you can count on in this life."

Felicity raised her head. "I do want to stay, I love it here, but—"

"Then stay. God always has a plan; He knows our choices before we do. The right man will come along... if that's what you want, and he has not already."

Felicity looked at Mrs. Coker in surprise, her heart wrenching. Thomas Doyle had sailed right into her plans, but he didn't want to marry, he abhorred it. "I think it's best that I go."

"Don't forget there are more gentlemen in the Indies than planters and politicians," Mrs. Coker winked.

Felicity made herself smile at the encouragement. "I know. Mr. Bradshaw is very nice," she joked.

Mrs. Coker made a face of pretend horror. "He is not nice enough," she said with severity, "unless you want to be wife number

four to a man who has one foot in the grave himself."

Felicity almost cheered with relief. "Then I can count on you as my friend for as long as I am here, I hope. I promise I never meant to deceive you about my sister."

"You were not obligated to share your sister's secrets with me," Mrs. Coker smiled, "but I do hope to hear every detail about it now." She put a finger to her lips and fluttered her lashes with an air of innocence. "I won't tell a soul."

Felicity took a deep breath. Finally, someone she could trust. She exhaled and settled herself back on the seat. "Euphemia is my elder sister," she began, "and how she brightens a room..."



Chapter Seventeen



Thomas frowned as he studied the shattered bowsprit that looked like it'd smashed into a stone wall instead of the sea. He'd thought they'd hit a reef in the violent storm the day before. Today the sun smiled down on him as he cupped his hand over his eyes to examine the damage. He'd hurried to Basseterre to repair and refit, one side of his mind anxious to protect the waters like he'd promised Fitz, but the other, the other side could think of nothing but Miss Barrow.

A fortnight at sea had forced some sense back into him. It had not healed his heart or hope, but at least the bloodletting had stopped. Lovely Miss Barrow. He could not, would not, avoid her forever. The eager young beauty had arrived in the Indies fleeing scandal that had robbed her of any opportunity to wed. She'd had no choice in the matter so she'd accepted the first man who had offered of course.

Marsh. Thomas shuddered. It was one thing if she loved the planter, felt some kind of connection to him, but he knew she did not. She mustn't be desperate, he worried, or she could end up miserable like his mama. The problem was what to do about it. It was Fitz's business to be sure, but was it his?

Thomas jerked his attention back to his task and studied the damage as Mr. Edens stepped up beside him. "Have you heard from the chandlery?" Thomas queried.

"We have," his mate answered. "The replacements will be here shortly."

"I appreciate you," Thomas choked out. "You're a pleasure to work with and a trusted friend."

"I am happy to stay on, Captain Doyle. I know there are rumors I want my own ship."

"Of course you are ready," Thomas admitted, "but there is always

something new to learn."

"When the time comes," shrugged Mr. Edens.

Thomas tamped down the urge to throw his arms around him. "I am so happy you are willing to sail with us a little longer."

His heart pinched. Miss Barrow would not stay. She'd marry quickly and sail home. He sighed. At least he had his crew intact. He cleared his throat. "I must be off. I have an errand," he explained, nodding toward the helm.

"We'll see to the repairs," Mr. Edens promised. If he suspected what Thomas's errands were he may have hinted at it with a tease, but he said nothing. To Fort Charles, resting just below Brimstone Hill, he might assume, and Thomas would let him think it. They only had to make repairs, but he should check on the Barrows, he decided. Fitz may have been in or left a message, and Miss Barrow should receive his congratulations if they were in order, and his advice if she would listen.

He straightened his clothes, combed his hair into a short pigtail, and chose his best tricot to walk into town. The case of foils tucked under his arm bounced as he stepped down the planking from ship to shore. A good walk would balance his sea legs, calm his apprehension, and give him time to prepare. The skies had cleared after the last blow.

Thomas drew in a deep breath and released the tension that made his chest feel heavy. A few acquaintances called from across the wharf, and he gave a swift salute but did not stop. Let them think he was on business. He was, he defended himself. Word on Fitz must be sought, and he had a promise to keep to a pupil. A friend. No need for Miss Barrow to know she could be so much more. He would move on.

He rapped on the door waiting anxiously to see who would receive him, and it was Mrs. Harris. A look of relief flitted across her face, and he said, "Is Commander Barrow in?" as she let him in without making him wait on the threshold. "I did not see the *Pelican*."

"He is not," she answered with some disappointment but motioned behind her. "Miss Barrow is sitting in the garden."

"What luck," he remarked, shifting the case under his arm so she could see his intention. "I am only in for a day or so on a matter of business, but I had some time to spare after all."

"How nice," Mrs. Harris returned in a pleasant tone, and she

escorted him to the back door. As they passed through it, she murmured so that only he could hear, "Miss Barrow has had no callers since her brother left—not since the ball." She glanced back at him, but her expression remained a blank card.

"I see," he replied in a quiet undertone, wondering what this meant. What did she mean that Marsh had not come? The back of Felicity's head turned, and she rose to her feet at their approach. "Thank you, Mrs. Harris," Thomas called, and the woman gave a gentle nod and returned inside.

The garden was dappled with morning shadows, and Felicity stood among them glowing in a modest day dress scattered with pink lilies. "Captain Doyle," she exclaimed, her voice edged with something he could not put his finger on.

"I've surprised you again, I think, or did you expect me?"

"Well, I..." She flitted her gaze past him like she did not want to meet his eye. "We have not had a lesson in a great many weeks."

Her face looked pale, he realized, although her eyes glimmered. Stiffness in her shoulders hinted at some discomfort. He hoped she did not remember the intensity of his gaze when they'd danced. He prayed she'd forgotten all about it. Crouching to set the case on the ground, Thomas called, "You do not mind, I hope. Should I have sent a message?"

"No, no," she assured him and touched her hands together. "I'm glad you have come. You are back from your routes then?"

"Only for a brief time. There was something possibly afoot as I'm sure your brother informed you."

"He said little before he left, other than there was serious business in the waters of the Leewards, and he had to see to his duties."

"Yes, well," hesitated Doyle. He did not know how much he should tell her. She had been through so much already. She did not need to worry about pirates again when she set sail for home. "I think it was probably nothing. There is always some game at play in the Indies. Politicking and all that," he excused. He opened the case and let it rest there then turned to confront her, to climb over the hurdle between them. "How are you?" he sincerely wanted to know. "I ask because I saw Marsh practically on bended knee before I left. I did not want to intrude. Is there news?"

"Yes. He had just regained his footing—after I refused."

Thomas's heart leapt, but Miss Barrow's cheeks turned blood red

as if someone had flipped a card over to reveal the Queen of Hearts. The blush spread down her throat, and her steady stare locked onto a palmetto beside him. "He knew about Femy, and he used it against me in front of everyone."

"Oh Flick," Thomas breathed, and he crossed the space between them in two strides. He took her hands to stop himself from wrapping his arms around her willowy body and crushing her into his chest. Looking into her surprised eyes, he found them glimmering with embarrassment. He did not know if it was her revelation or his use of her family name, but he decided to blame it on Marsh.

"You must not mind it," he whispered. "Marsh is a common man, and by that I mean commonplace. Only a fool would propose to a woman in front of an assembly, and only a wolf in sheep's clothing would insult her for refusing."

"All of town knows," Felicity croaked, her voice breaking into halves. Threatening tears were pushed back somewhere deep inside of herself. "I was not invited to weekly tea at the Sanfords, and no one speaks to me at church, not even Mr. Bradshaw."

"Who cares about all that?" Thomas insisted. He gave her warm hands a gentle squeeze.

"Not in the market, either," she added. "I imagine the butcher had a laugh at my expense." She wet her lips, and he saw her tight shoulders relax. "I have not been out except to church."

"No one's called, I suspect?"

"No," she admitted, "but for Mrs. Coker, who has visited with me twice and even ordered our coffee bean for us."

"Well, of course she would, she's very kind. A good Christian lady."

"She is," agreed Felicity with vehemence, "and I am ever so grateful for her. And you," she added, shifting her gaze. "I'm glad you have come, I mean."

Realizing he still held her hands, Thomas released them and shuffled his boots letting his arms hang at his sides. "I am happy to see you, too, although I'm sorry I missed your brother. I have a few hours to spare and thought we might have a lesson if you do not think it too improper after what has transpired."

"After everything else I have done?" Felicity gave a weighted exhale. "I arrived with scandal in my wake and encouraged Mr. Marsh whom I really did not want after all. Now I'm certain I've

made a fool of myself and all of my family no matter what Mrs. Coker says." Felicity shook her head in denial. "She's just being kind."

"Mrs. Coker is as wise as they come, perhaps you should listen to her," Thomas encouraged. "Besides, we all come with stories." He glanced up at the hills. "People around us may treat us as they wish after they learn of them, but why should we let an opinion determine our fate?"

"Well, it's not fair," Miss Barrow whispered, "and I will tell you this: I don't think it's my fault what my sister has done. I should have told Mama so and refused to be shipped off like something to be ashamed of. Who cares how many seasons I had or if I want to spend the rest of my life knocking around the country house without being shackled to a stranger? I'm still a Barrow after all."

"That you are," said Thomas, heart sinking. So she wished she had not come. At least she did not blame herself for what others had done. "Marsh is not your fault, either," he promised her. "He is ages older than you and had his designs. You behaved nothing more than what was proper and polite. I saw no real encouragement. If you had refused his dances and calls, I wager he would have been just as rancorous."

Felicity gazed up at him as if seeing the light. "I know you're right about that, and Mrs. Coker, too. Even Fitz says so. No matter how difficult it may be, it's time I stop putting everyone else's welfare above my own."

"At the expense of what is proper and expected," Thomas reminded her. He put his hands behind his back as if on deck observing his crew. "I do know a thing about scandal, you remember. My family did not just sell Sugar Hill, they lost it. Or my father did. He was addicted to gambling and drink. Nothing got in the way of what he wanted, and he only wanted for himself."

"I'm so sorry," she sympathized. "I can't imagine such a cruel man, and for you to lose your sweet mother after enduring so much at his hand."

"Oh, he was cruel alright." A flash of fear almost made Thomas take it back, bite his lip, cut off his tongue, but he would not stop. Miss Barrow would not judge.

"My mother died when I was young but not of illness or by accident." He met her eyes with a steady gaze. "She was practically a child when she was *properly* wed. It was arranged, and he never

loved her. His cruelty and abuse only added to the burdens she carried, and when we moved to a drafty cottage down along the wharf after his debts were called in, the weight of the shame, exhaustion, and concerns about our standing in society and where our next meal would come from killed her spirit."

Felicity looked heartbroken. "No wonder you have no wish to settle down. In his own way, the man killed her."

"He did," Thomas agreed, his throat thick with all of the debris he'd carried for so long, "but not with his bare hands, with cruelty and neglect. He was a proper gentleman beyond closed doors, and it was all a lie."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. How it must weigh on you."

"It has but long enough. I buried the monster, or someone in Kingston did. Let him rot."

"Your mother? Is she here? Buried on Sugar Hill?" Felicity wondered.

Thomas looked down at the sandy earth. "No," he mumbled. "She is not here. I wanted to buy Sugar Hill from your brother so I could burn it to the ground, you recall. It would be different if she was buried there, but that is the biggest Doyle scandal of all."

Felicity reached out for him, and he accepted her hand. She squeezed his now, giving him comfort. "We did not bury her," he went on in a tight voice. "She jumped to her death from a cliff into the ocean. I was old enough to go to sea, and she could not hold on any longer, could not bear the shame and despair. My father kept an address and our remaining funds at a brothel in Jamaica. We had nothing, but she knew I yearned to sail, so she - she ended it."

"Thomas, I did not know. I'm so sorry." Miss Barrow did not gasp or gape at his tale. In his heart, he had known she would not, and he wanted to hug her for it.

"You see," Thomas continued with a cutting laugh, "even gossip such as this is eventually forgotten. A fisherman found her body and brought her to shore, but there was no one to see she was laid to rest. By the time I was given the news, they had carried her back out to sea and disposed of her in the depths. The clergyman at the time would not have a suicide buried in the graveyard."

"I'm so sorry. That is the saddest thing I have ever heard."

"She was not quite right at the time."

"How it must have affected you so." Felicity sounded like she truly understood.

"I cannot tolerate cruelty," Thomas admitted, "or a woman in distress. That's why I will not trade—not sugar or rice nor any other good produced off the backs of human chattel. My only choice is the Royal Navy or a letter of marque and reprisal. I'm afraid I chose the one less proper."

"This is why you are a pirate hunter, isn't it? Because of your father?"

Thomas stared in surprise. He had never conquered his father, rid the earth of him. "I suppose you are right."

"I have also noticed you are not fond of the planters in Basseterre," Felicity observed, "including Mr. Marsh."

"I tried to be fair, but I suspected he had a greater interest in Sugar Hill than you once he learned it was to be your dowry. He only wants more like so many of great wealth do. What man needs more than one roof over his head and at the cost of human dignity?"

Felicity pressed his hand. "Perhaps that is why I could not make myself agree to an engagement. Something didn't feel right, and I felt nothing for him."

"You don't?" Thomas knew his eyes were studded with interest.

The apples of her cheeks became rosy. "No, and there is... well, despite everything with Femy and Mr. Marsh's gossip, Mrs. Coker has reminded me there is no reason to rush home tomorrow, but I think it's time I consider it."

"Perhaps Mrs. Coker is right," acknowledged Thomas, his heart squeezing, "but if it's what you want..." Could Felicity not see possibility standing right in front of her? Were a ship and his heart not enough? "You must miss England very much," he surmised so she did not see his pain, "and your country house."

"Oh, it's a wonderful place," Felicity assured him. "It really is, and I will be quite happy there even if I return without a husband." She flushed a little again, and he thought it made her look as lovely as a bougainvillea bloom.

"Well, until you sail for home we should maintain your defenses," he offered, "and your hunting skills, too, in case you should decide to try to hook another fish." She crinkled her forehead in some semblance of mortification, and he chuckled, shaking himself from her spell. "I'm quite disappointed in you, Flick, you should have called Mr. Marsh out for his insulting display."

She laughed. "Yes, he was quite angry. He thoroughly abused

me."

Thomas crossed the garden to the weapons case, and she followed him. "I'm sure you could dispose of him quickly if you tried," he scolded." She giggled as he passed her a foil. They trotted back to the grass between the vegetable beds and crouched before one another. "Pretend I'm him," Thomas growled, "and I've just insulted your family."

A flicker of mischief flashed in her eye, and it made his heart bounce again, but he didn't mind it. He welcomed it. A few moments with her like this would be all he'd be able to enjoy until she moved on to better waters. Someday she'd disappear like Mama, but at least Felicity would have her happy ending home in her country house in England.

"On guard, you villain," she cried, and with great seriousness, parried with him back and forth among the sandy garden until he stumbled on the sadness lurking in his heart and let her leave her mark.



Chapter Eighteen



The next week, encouraged by Captain Doyle's confidence in her, Felicity braved another church sermon but returned to the cottage exhausted after holding her head high for so long. Mrs. Coker invited her to tea later in the week, but after locking her spine for so many hours while others pretended she was a smudge on a dish, she decided she'd had quite enough society for a spell.

Swirling, heavy clouds sloshed past the island almost every day, proving Fitz right when he said it could rain like in the days of Noah. He sailed into port missing Captain Doyle's departure by ten days, and expecting him, Felicity put on her best day dress, curled the locks at her temples, and labored in the parlor on an embroidered waistcoat she'd decided to give him for an early birthday present. Not long after midday, he clomped into the house dropping his things along the way then peeked into the parlor as if not certain she would be there.

"Here you are. I almost went out through the back because I expected to find you in the garden."

"The weather won't stay true," Felicity complained. She rose to her feet and turned her cheek for a welcoming kiss. "I must confess Mr. Coker's books don't hold my attention for long either."

"That's true enough," agreed Fitz, "the rain, I mean." He flopped down onto the settle, and she lowered herself beside him. "I can't stay long, Flick, lud." He ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair. "I keep running into small boats without cargo or nets, you see. The waters are teeming with suspicious characters, and I aim to keep them out of the Leewards if I can help it, but it takes me further away."

"Of course, but that's your duty," she understood.

"Yes, but no. At least we have Brimstone Hill and the forts," he said, "but it's the waters I'm worried about." He crossed one leg over

another with a sigh. "The rain is relentless, ain't it? Have you even had your exercise? I saw Mr. Coker at the customs house, and he said you haven't been to tea, and that Mrs. Coker misses seeing you at the milliner's and walking along the shore."

"Like you said, too damp," Felicity murmured. "I send Mrs. Harris alone to the market. She doesn't mind. She has her friends." Feeling Fitz's examination, Felicity picked up her embroidery frame to have something to do.

"This isn't about Marsh, is it?" he surmised. "I know he proposed, and I encouraged it, but you mustn't worry too much if you've decided to keep looking."

"You act as if it's as simple as browsing through ribbons."

"Should be," Fitz grunted. He stretched an arm along the back of the settle just over her shoulders. "I'm sorry you ladies have to make such a run of it instead of sail or politick." He sniffed. "What about the Church?"

"No, thank you," Felicity retorted as he chuckled at his joke. "He has made it his mission to inform everyone about Femy and why I am here."

"Who cares." Fitz waved her off. "Most people probably guessed something like that since you are not widowed, and Femy's elopement is no secret among the ton."

"Yes, but now no one in town will speak to me because of Marsh. He's made me a villain. They even pretend I'm invisible at teas."

Fitz's enthusiasm waned. He grunted. "See? This is why I was anxious to leave Mayfair society behind. I do not understand the Englishman's interest in everyone else's troubles."

Felicity frowned. "I suppose their censure is more for refusing Mr. Marsh than word of Femy's elopement, but I left England to escape such scorn, and yet I've found it here."

"Oh, sister," sighed Fitz. "You must not mind it. There's no place in the world you can go where you won't find carping—even jealousy and hate. Some people are good and some are bad, and that's all there is to it."

"Life is not so black and white, I've discovered," Felicity disagreed. "Why, if there's anything I've learned, life is colorful with only thin grey lines, and I must decide what's closest to the right thing."

"Closest to the right thing for you," Fitz corrected her, "and if

you ask me, I think you did the right thing telling old Marsh no thank you. Mama and Edward wanted the introduction after I mentioned his name and income, but the fellow is more concerned with property and his county fame than what's best for you."

Anxious, Felicity leaned into him. "What do you think is best for me? Mrs. Harris tried to entice me into the hills yesterday for a walk to Sugar Hill between rain showers. I wasn't sure if I should go or not. Besides, I do wish Papa had put some money into it—to think Captain Doyle must stay there with it practically in ruins. I think he would feel differently about his family if it weren't in such shambles."

She'd been up all night thinking about Sugar Hill—what it might look like if it was rebuilt, and what it would feel like to live there with Thomas Doyle at her side. She secretly yearned to spend mornings on the veranda watching the sunrise together, talking about the sea and his ship or the gardens she could begin, but it seemed like a dream.

As if reading her mind, Fitz said, "If you like it so much you should marry someone who does, too, I suppose. I'm sorry Doyle is determined to stay single. Perhaps your next suitor will be loaded with money and want to make it a lovely plantation."

"I won't want to grow sugarcane there. I shan't have anything but a vegetable garden."

"Then how will he manage it?" wondered Fitz. "You would have to marry someone very rich indeed."

"Perhaps someone in shipping," murmured Felicity then bit her lip. Against her will, an aching sigh escaped.

Fitz made a noise of frustration. Even he couldn't see into her heart. "I did think you were happy here, Flick, but perhaps you should consider going home after all. I would miss you awful bad, but it's better than seeing you suffer. Besides, what can Mama do? Turn you away?" He dropped his boot to the floor with a clap.

"Perhaps you're right," whispered Felicity, blotting out Mrs. Coker's and Captain Doyle's encouragements. "Besides, I'm already practically decided. It is best I go home."

Fitz's words still stung. Her visions of Sugar Hill dropped like the sun beneath the horizon and everything went dark. Mr. Marsh had been refused, Femy had scandalized the island after all, and Captain Doyle would not invest his heart. Poor Fitz was busy with his gun sloop and crew.

"I will write Mama." She had failed. Not the family but herself. She'd fallen in love with someone worse than a footman, a man who did not want her at all.



FELICITY COULD NOT bring herself to begin a letter to Mama or Edward. Her stomach sat in coils that made it almost impossible to breathe. She did not want to leave her brother. Not her island. Not Thomas Doyle, even if he should never be anything more than an acquaintance. But she must. She knew she must.

Aching with grief, Felicity reread Femy's letters with dripping tears. Femy was really who she missed the most. Her sister would have been her only serious regret should she had stayed in Basseterre, but it was not to be. Would Mama allow her to see Femy when she returned home?

Later that evening while Fitz snored from across the landing, Felicity leaned over the small writing table in her room. She arranged her lamp so she could see clearly to write. Her tear-stained cheek brushed against her shoulder, and it stung, but she ignored it as her mind sallied back and forth between feelings and words. She squeezed the goose quill pen in her fingers and let ink ooze from the nib in a lazy river.

Dearest Euphemia,

I imagine that by the time you read this you are no longer pumpkin-like, I am an aunt, and stubborn Mama has forgiven you for following your heart. How I hope and pray all is well.

You have guessed right in your letters. St. Christopher is truly a gleaming paradise with exotic trees and vibrant flowers. They are so lovely to press and frame.

I intend to send you a breadfruit which I have grown to love with breakfast by way of Fitz and one of his connections in the shipping lanes. What more can I say about adventure near the equator? There is no winter, no snow, and no ice. But before you become wistful, you must know it rains a great deal and there are no autumn harvests or frozen ponds to skate. The weather is eternally warm or wet.

You would be proud of our brother. How well Fitz looks sailing his sleek gun sloop up and down the coast like he did paper boats in the stream at home so many years ago. By home, I should tell you that I mean the country house, because I have come to the conclusion that our town house in Mayfair was never really a home; it was more of a port

where we were loaded with expectations and duties and sailed out for the Season. Were we ever happier than when we played in the country with nothing but brothers and dogs in the gardens?

You, too, must have a delightful view and the best company in the world in your little cottage. I cannot wait to see it. To be honest, I prefer this rugged and sticky climate over London's grime, but I daresay it is not my destiny to remain in the sandy, emerald Indies forever. I am, at this time, making preparations to return home. Nothing of import has come of my introduction to Fitz's friends and acquaintances, so I'm afraid neither of Mama's first or second daughters will settle as she imagined.

Felicity's heart squeezed, and she sat back with an exhale letting her shoulders slump. She would not share how Femy's scandals followed her here. She could not bear to explain how she'd refused Mr. Marsh. Her throat tightened, and she wished Femy could wrap her arms around her and tell her everything would be alright in the end; that someday she would wake up, and this chapter of her life in the Indies would seem like a long-forgotten story. Within it would remain only the faintest memory of a captain with hair as black as onyx and thick heavy brows— one with a jagged scar.

She pressed the back of her hand to her eyes to fight back tears. Why did she have to fall in love with a man so much like her brother? Captain Doyle was a sailor who loved his ship and the sea more than anything else. He appeared to have no room in his life for a wife or a family, he did not even believe in it. The man was so scarred on the inside he wanted to burn down an entire hill as if he could erase history.

A tear escaped, and Felicity let it cascade down her cheek. She sniffled, her heart so heavy she could fall to her knees. What would Femy advise her to do? Why she would say something like what she'd written before... "*I know you think me a rebellious, silly thing, but hear me when I plead with you not to wed anyone who does not make your heart burst into flame with every sideways glance."*

The words echoed in her mind. Felicity swiped at her eyes, leaned back over the table, and dipped the nib back into the inkwell. With a deep breath, she continued.

There is a man...



Chapter Nineteen



Three weeks later, Thomas sat on the long veranda that edged the front of the house, hoping the rickety chair would hold his weight. He was certain if he settled too far in the middle of the sagging cane seat he'd fall through the frame. Rolling a candle stub back and forth in his fingers, he watched the yellow-orange flame flicker in irritation. He'd yanked it from its bracket on the way out of the house, his mind imagining himself throwing it into the patches of wild, overgrown sugarcane and watching it catch fire. He stuck his thumb close to the singeing heat until his nail screamed for mercy then shook the flame out and was left in darkness.

"Should have," he mumbled, glancing around. The steady routine of sporadic rainfall did not leave much chance for a wildfire to raze the island, but the inside of the house was dry enough. All it would take was a glowing ember, a crumb of fire to ignite it, and the old place would go up as fast as tinder. He could do it once and for all—burn the place down and his ghosts along with it. What would the Barrows do really? Houses burned down all the time, and the next proprietor could thank him and rebuild.

Yet something would not let him do it, and that something, he knew, was really someone. Flick. Her behavior upon their last meeting when he had limped into port, after explaining she had refused Marsh with a breathless look of expectation, had renewed his cursed hopes. Dare he try again? Beg her to stay? Love the Indies? Love him? Or did he sail off forever—at least until her brother sent her back to England? Until then he could find a new home, perhaps in Nevis.

The thought of not seeing Felicity in the cottage, at the Cokers, or wandering the beaches with Mrs. Harris made it feel like the peaks of St. Christopher were sinking down on him and crushing his soul. Thomas leaned back aching with disappointment and searched

the darkness. The moon was a weak splinter. Shadows danced across the yard from tree to tree if he stared hard enough.

Mr. Edens spoke often of the haunted spirits that roamed the tropical forests on St. Christopher's volcanic peaks—dark spirits and departed natives who were brought to the island by wind and sea long before he existed. If Thomas looked too long, he also imagined he saw Mama.

As if summoned, a ribbon of mist slunk out from among the trees. His skin rippled with chills although he knew it was only a sliver of fog from the cooling night. It hovered over the remains of the boiling house searching for something, then dissipated to a lingering tendril and floated up into the sky. Mesmerized, Thomas watched it rise toward the moon as if going home, but it hesitated just over the horizon where it seemed to be swallowed by distant stars—no—lights on the horizon. Lanterns, he was sure. They looked out of place against the heavenly constellations.

Blast! He had to resolve this. He was a wallowing mess of indecision, and if his father were here he would beat it out of him. The *Defiant* had slunk in to resupply, but Thomas did not seek out Felicity again although she might be expecting another lesson. The dockmaster had informed him he had just missed the *Pelican*, so it was as they planned, that always one of them should be at sea to keep watch. If Fitz was out, Thomas should stay nearby, but that meant seeing Felicity.

It was all too much. Thomas could hardly concentrate on what he was doing at the helm. Even the promise of prizes and capturing pirates had not quieted his mind—or his heart. So he had snuck into port, hurried up to Sugar Hill, and fought sleeplessness because he could not ignore the fact that pretty Flick was just a walk away down the winding sandy road into town, and he knew the next time he saw her he must pour out his heart to her or seal it shut forever. If only he knew a way to convince her to stay. Could what he had to offer be enough? Would she even want his heart or did she hope to find a better qualified copy of Mr. Marsh?

Thomas returned his attention to the stars and lanterns on the horizon. The stars held fast, but the distant ship lanterns moved steadily away until he could no longer see them except for one last glimpse to the southwest. He wasn't sure. It was as if she'd bypassed the harbor and blown her lights out. Thomas climbed to his feet and shouldered an unsteady column that shivered at his mass and gazed

down at the port below. All seemed quiet. Surely the watch had spotted what he'd seen.

His gut tensed, but he pushed away the possible reasons why a ship would sail past Basseterre so suspiciously. He was tired. The last few weeks at sea had offered nothing more than a few foreign merchants and no one carrying anything illegal. There had been no messages from Fitz or anyone else. No word of pirates. The concern at Fort Charles and the prisoner Walsh's threats were nothing more than that. Stories and rumors.

Thomas chided himself for feeling apprehensive. His bruised heart had been shorn so bare every emotion made him worry and wince like his fragile mama. He settled back into his sad little seat and wondered if Fitz would reconsider selling him the land if Felicity did not marry soon. Perhaps Thomas could offer a substantial sum the desperate Barrow family could not refuse if Flick ran out of suitors. The news of her brother's gambling was out.

He looked up and down the porch and imagined it with a fresh coat of white paint and blue- trimmed windows and suddenly knew he would not burn it down if he somehow acquired it. The house might have not held the best memories, but the rest of his life beyond it had been good. He could take Sugar Hill apart and build it up again much like he had his life: from a ramshackle cottage to his first vessel as a powder boy, then a midshipman, next a third lieutenant, and then he'd been released. There'd been enough money from the shards of his shattered family wealth along with his savings to buy a boat and then a ship. Today he was not a wealthy man but a comfortable one, and he was respected. He had redeemed the Doyle name, and no one cared a whit about his drunk and lusty predecessor. Not around here anyway.

Felicity crept back into his thoughts. Perhaps he could transform his relationship with her, too. He could make her understand that he'd been trying to reach out at the ball, to show her his feelings, and that her attention to Marsh had deflated him after sending a cannonball through his heart. Maybe she would not think him quite a monster if he explained he did not want to burn down the old house anymore. He wanted the land, still, but he wanted something shining and new like the sunrise over the horizon every day. A new day always brought another chance, another hope. Mama had not seen that, but the sea had taught him well.

The faint echo of a pistol shot echoed further up in the hills.

Thomas peered into the darkness. Odd time for a hunt, and speaking of hunting and hope, Felicity had refused Marsh yet mentioned her hope to return home. Was it just because of Marsh? Did he have a chance to convince her to stay? Thomas shook his head bemused with himself. He'd tackle a woman suspected of pirating before asking questions but wouldn't pursue a simple explanation where his feelings were concerned.

How he longed to request her hand. It was as if Mama had taken a part of him with her when she died but had sent it back from the deep, across the waves, up into the hills, and straight into his heart. He'd never found the courage to ask her to not let go, so he couldn't let Felicity leave without asking, begging, her to stay. Love him. Choose him. He would, Thomas thought with a start, sail with her to London if she required it. His heart swelled. He loved her that much.

Something in the night air agreed with him, but the murmur of bustling activity from town pulled him from his contentment. Thomas roused himself and stood again to survey the port. Just as he cupped a hand over his eyes to see if he could make out Brimstone Hill to the west, a small glow sparked in the night and the return echo of a warning shot boomed from the fortress's parapets. He frowned and squinted. Below, the church bell of St. George's sang a deep gonging sound. He jerked his head up at more gunfire that sprinkled across the forest behind him. It was as if a dark force had magically opened a window into the night.

Magic. Pushing through the clouded confusion in his mind, Thomas saw the pirate Walsh's grimy face again: *Even a good sleight of hand can trick a magician*. Another cannon fired below, and Thomas's heart sparked with dangerous warning, too. All of the big ships and little coastal sloops had turned their attention to deep waters or the smaller islands and cays. St. Christopher had nothing to protect it but the *Defiant*. The French had come and gone, even the Dutch, but pirates? They'd never totally disappeared, not those like Hervieux, Walsh, and many others. Thomas suddenly knew what was afoot. Pirates had come to St. Christopher island tonight where Basseterre waited on the shore with all of her wealth and bounty for the taking.



THE TOLLING OF THE church bell awoke Felicity with a sleepy

groan. Her hand went to her neck when she first thought of Papa and his funeral. Gone. Buried. An old grief pressed against her throat. She came to herself in the darkness when Mrs. Harris burst into the room with a small candle trying to catch its breath. "Invaders!" she screeched. "We're under attack!"

"What! Who?" Felicity scrambled out of bed. Mrs. Harris found Felicity's slippers, tossed them across the room at her, then ran to the wardrobe and yanked out a pair of boots. The woman tried to shoe Felicity like a horse at the same time Felicity was trying to climb into her dressing gown.

Voices echoed from the front of the house, and Felicity swung her gaze to the window. "It's so dark outside. Fitz!" she cried, remembering he was not at home. "Fitz is—"

"We'll run to the church," panted Mrs. Harris.

"Is that where people go? Do you—has this happened before?"

"The French," spat her housekeeper. "They signed the treaty, but they are back! How dare them!"

The growling sound of heavy cannons firing their ammunitions pierced the air. Felicity thought she felt the island shudder. "French!" she breathed, reaching for Mrs. Harris's hand but tripping over her to escape the room. They shot out of the house and down the street with Felicity vaguely aware that her hair was in a long messy braid, she'd put nothing on her head, and she wore no petticoat. What would people think, she worried, then she saw neighbors half-dressed, some shockingly so, flooding toward St. George's with their arms filled with bags and small trunks.

"My pearl earrings!" she cried then realized how ridiculous it sounded. She had so little, and she didn't need to carry her gowns through the streets. She'd never been in a fight excepting her brothers, but that had all been pretend. What did the French do to English ladies? What would become of her cottage? The island? How dare the villains startle her from her sleep and frighten her so when she had done nothing to them. She'd never done anything to anyone. Always, she tried to be fair and good. Felicity could almost imagine the twins on either side of her shaking their fists to show their support.

"Through here," cried Mrs. Harris. She dragged Felicity to the mob outside the church doors, and Felicity caught a glimpse of the vicar wringing his hands and hurrying everyone inside. The hair on the side of his head was ruffled straight up like a chicken's wing.

Felicity and Mrs. Harris hurried into a row between wooden benches and sank to their knees like everyone else. Across the aisle, Mrs. Sanford and her daughter were praying. Some women and children cried. A few others, like Felicity, looked around in confusion. *Why*, she thought, *we're just sitting here like helpless sheep. Where's the sense in that?*

She remembered the reason she had been sent to St. Christopher and how she had not put up a fight. When the French corsairs had boarded her ship and torn her away from her chaperones, she'd been afraid to make a scene. Now suddenly, she cared nothing about her state or anyone else's. No one seemed to remember that she'd refused Mr. Marsh, the man with whom she'd walked and danced and gone riding with in his fancy gig. In fact, Felicity thought, swiveling her head to the door that was swallowing in throngs of frightened families, no one seemed to care what anyone else was doing.

Beside her, Mrs. Harris began a Catholic prayer, and ignoring what that meant, Felicity patted her on the shoulder and struggled to her feet. At least she had put on a pair of decent shoes.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Harris stretched for her hand.

Felicity gently shook her off. "I won't just sit here," she breathed with her heart scudding like a wave across the sea's surface. "Lord Barrow would not sit here and neither would Fitz. The twins would be at the fortress by now, and even my sister, Femy, would do something."

Felicity ignored the elevated sounds of Mrs. Harris's protests and struggled through the crowd back to the front doors. She jumped when someone grabbed her hand, but it was only the confused clergyman. "Back inside," he coaxed, but she shook her head.

"I can do more out here," she insisted, struggling to feel brave. Several men had taken up positions around the church. Some held pistols. Others gripped daggers. One juggled a long sword and a cutlass.

And here I said I would never run off into the night. Felicity swallowed. She could handle a sword. She didn't know how much good it would do, but Fitz and Captain Doyle had taught her a few new tricks. Besides, what man would expect a woman to have any skill with a weapon other than a sewing needle?

She tightened the sash around her gown and marched around the side of the church. A man with the pair of rapiers glanced at

her. "Sir? May I?"

He hesitated then gave her a swift nod. It was Mr. Bradshaw, she realized. He wore a pair of light breeches with a small coat over his naked chest. He was very thin, she thought, as she sidled in-between him and a man standing at a gate that led to the gravestones.

More cannon fire thundered across the night sky, and Felicity shivered. It seemed as if the shots were echoing from all over the island. A light fog began to fill the empty street. It had been a rather warm day but cool breezes had moved in with the darkness. Felicity was grateful some of the streetlamps were lit; at least they could see who was coming when they came.

Shouts and pistol fire reverberated from the hill behind the churchyard, and she gulped and tightened her grip on the handle of her sword. There was a loud whisper from over her shoulder, and she jumped then folded with relief when she saw Mr. Coker.

"Why Miss Barrow," he called, trotting to a stop with a musket under an arm and a torch in the other. "What are you doing here? You must hurry to my house and join Mrs. Coker."

Felicity shook her head. "I can fight; at least defend these families. There are children and—"

"But you'd be safe there."

"Would I?" She wrinkled her forehead remembering the childhood strategies of her brothers' games. "You have a fine house, Mr. Coker. I suppose it would be ransacked before an old church."

She saw his jaw tighten. Another shout and gunshot echoed from the hill. "They have not taken the port, not yet," Felicity guessed, "but they are somehow coming down from the hills."

"From the other side of the island. How clever and unpredictable to hit the capital last." Mr. Coker gave her a sharp nod. "You're right, I'm going back to the house. If you get lost or hurt, you must come there, too. Run if they breach this church."

"They won't," she replied in a thick voice.

"What a woman you are, Miss Barrow," exclaimed Mr. Coker. "My wife is right to admire you so." He took off at a jog back into the shadows behind the church before she could thank him. There were footfalls and scuffling now, and Felicity feared her trembling hands would drop the sword. What was she doing? Should she be hiding in the church with the other women? No. She was a Barrow, and Barrows fought back even when it wasn't proper.

"Halt!" someone cried, and she turned in time to see a crowd of men with swords and sticks come around the corner and spread out along the street. They were not young fierce men in French coats moving in neat lines. They did not look neat at all.

"Surrender you!" cried Mr. Bradshaw, and Felicity froze as the mob of attackers engaged the men guarding the church. She thought they looked a good deal like the grimy corsairs who'd kidnapped her off her merchantman.

"Pirates!" someone shouted, and the world became a melee of clashing wood and steel.

Pirates. Of course. The curse of the Caribbean. Felicity buried her heel into the ground to ready herself. All her life she had fought pretend pirates and—

A pair of them broke through the line. One swerved straight for her. He wore a lusty grin beneath a filthy handkerchief knotted around his head, and he was shirtless, too. Shocking, she thought with a flick of irritation as she raised the rapier.

He had, perhaps, intended only to stop and taunt her, so she smacked him soundly across the side of his head with the edge of her sword as fair warning. Cursing loudly, he took a wild swing at her, but she parried it off. The fight was clumsy, but Felicity wisely kept the church wall to her back.

"You wretch!" the villain cried again when she jabbed his upper shoulder. She caught herself holding her breath and exhaled. How poorly trained they were, reckless and wild without defense or strategy. "A woman!" someone shouted in an amused voice, and Felicity realized others were watching.

Why this is not too difficult at all, she thought, her mind flashing back on the games of her childhood. She stumbled and nearly took a thrust to the middle. *Except they really want to kill me!* "Oh, Fitz," she gasped as she righted herself, "why did you have to leave so soon, and where is Captain Doyle?"



Chapter Twenty



When all of Perdition broke loose, Thomas rushed into the house throwing shirts and waistcoats aside before diving for his pistols and blades. He could only surmise the invaders had rounded the island and dropped anchor in one of the bays on the north of St. Christopher. The port of Basseterre, he predicted, they'd attempt to penetrate once they distracted the forts with their unpredictable landing.

"Pirates," he breathed, running out the front door and jumping the stairs with a crash into the grass. He knew it as surely as he knew the *Defiant* would be safe for only a short time. Mr. Edens had been assigned to oversee her and the light crew onboard tonight.

Thomas scrambled down the hill ignoring who might be above the house. The enemy had already worked its way down from the peaks by following old hunting footpaths and the faint roads carved by carts and wagons. Soon, they would crash into the homes and sanctuaries of the capital—and the Barrows!

The *Pelican* was not in port. Perhaps the sloop-o-war had been taken out of the fight in deeper waters. Fitz could be hurt or a prisoner. That meant Felicity was alone with no family, no one, to protect her. Thomas grunted as his thighs burned from the speed of his pounding gait down the hillside. His lungs screamed for a reprieve, but he made a beeline through the town toward the street lined with cottages where the Barrows lived. There had been no time to round up a horse.

The outskirts of Basseterre were dark, and he squinted to see through the darkness. There was a faint glow of lanterns and torches several streets over near the church. Shouts and cries rang out from the wharves then heart-stopping artillery from the fort turned his head. Surely Brimstone Hill was not under attack, too. He gasped for air. Someone else must handle that one.

Thomas ducked into a corner to catch his breath. He agonized over his ship. Surely he must hurry to the *Defiant*, his crew, his friends, his income... More shouts lofted up through the darkness from the square. People could have escaped to the protection of the fort, but it was miles away. Many would have cowed in their homes or perhaps... He searched for St. George's steeple.

Torn with indecision, Thomas nearly dropped to his knees to pray for guidance but the cries of combat swelled up from the church's direction, and he knew that he must go. No matter if Felicity had rushed to the protection of Brimstone Hill, no matter if the *Defiant* got underway without him, Thomas knew he had to help where he was needed most. "I couldn't save you, Mama," he said under his breath, "but I can help these people." *Oh, God, please protect Miss Barrow*, he pleaded in his mind. He would find her if he had to crawl.

The cobblestones around the church echoed from the tangle of men fighting hand to hand. Swords clashed, and for a moment, Thomas felt out of his element with his feet on dry ground. A man cried out, and he watched Mr. Bradshaw crumple, wounded, to the ground. Sickened, he dove into the fray. His aim was never to fight to the death but to subdue and surrender, but these pillagers were attacking people who had already surrendered their homes. *Just like Papa. Crush and destroy*.

Thomas raised his pistol to the most bloodthirsty of the aggressors and fired, then with a grunt of fury, charged into the fray swinging his sword with all of his great might sending pirates to their knees. Leaving a trail of bodies behind him, he rounded the corner of the church and took out an enemy from behind who fell backward in stunned surprise. Thomas twirled the sword in the air, readjusted his grip, and leapt forward into the shapely silhouette of a tall woman with hair hanging down her back.

"Doyle!" Felicity cried, a blade wavering in her hand.

Thomas nearly tossed his weapons to the ground and swept her into his arms. He threw them around her, cupping the back of her head as she flung herself around his neck.

"Pirates!" she said, "or French—"

"Not the French," he breathed into her hair. It seemed like madness to watch the fight around them while his heart burned. He squeezed his eyes shut and inhaled the scent of what had once been rosewater in her hair. "Felicity," he murmured, and her chin turned

up.

He looked into her upturned face and found her pale and panting in the darkness. Her little mouth drooped with relief. She was happy to see him. Without thinking, Thomas dropped his mouth to hers and kissed her soundly, just long enough to feel her, to taste her, and to give her the words he had held back for so long. Earth quaking tremors shook him from head to toe then he began to slip away into a warm, dark whirlpool with no one and nothing but the woman in his heart. He came up for air so he did not float away. Felicity's eyelids looked drowsy, dreamy, but as he pulled away, her eyes flashed open wide in surprise. More energy crackled between them, but incoming battle cries jerked their attention to the world around them.

Thomas caught her up by the elbow and shielded her as a trio of pirates shot from the gate to the graveyard. Her sword came up beside him, and he heard her cry out a warning as the blasts of a dozen muskets fired from the other side of the church.

Reinforcements. They had come. As if to reassure him, the thunder of cannons pounded the air from the direction of the port's entrance. Fitz! Thomas knew the sound of the commander's light chasers bolted to his bow.

Smiling, Thomas raised his sword as Felicity pulled away with hers at the ready. He should have told her to go, to run, and to hide, but he knew she wouldn't listen. *I would follow her all the way to England if I had to and I will,* he thought. He met her questioning gaze and jerked his chin toward the pirates as if they were harmless insects. Together, they chased after them.



TREMBLING FROM EITHER nerves or the night chill, Felicity wondered if she had imagined Thomas had kissed her. She allowed him to escort her back to the cottage. Help had arrived. Basseterre had fought and won. She had fought—and survived. The pirates had surrendered when they found themselves surrounded by muskets and a small army.

"Are you cold?" Thomas's arm went around her waist, and she warmed inside. "I'm sure I'll be fine by dawn." Felicity thought of morning, of waking up beside him if it could ever be true. She ducked her head. No. It could never be. Thomas hated the idea of forever with someone so much he wanted to burn down the house

on Sugar Hill. Felicity wondered if she should offer up her heart and let him burn that to ashes, too.

He squeezed her again as if concerned about her unkempt state, and the tingling reassurance made her want to cry. "They did not expect anyone to defend themselves," he said with an incredulous shake of his head, "or that no man would cower in fear."

"Or woman," Felicity murmured.

He reached for her hand, and it shot sparks into her heart as his thick fingers curled around her own. In the back of her mind, she thought she should go back to the church and find Mrs. Harris, but the relief and steady sense of security she felt at Thomas's side refused to bow to her concerns. Mrs. Harris was strong and no-nonsense. She would find her way home.

They ambled through the streets toward the cottage, stopping intermittently for Thomas to report to an officer from Fort Charles. Felicity's eyes watered when someone informed them the *Pelican* was in port after chasing away a few pirate sloops who were clearing the way for heavier and more dangerous ships. The British Navy had arrived in time, too, with a brigantine and a man-o'-war who had sniffed out the news from several prisoners they'd taken at sea just two days before.

"I should have listened to Walsh," growled Thomas under his breath, as he guided her through the front door that hung like a sheet from a line.

"What?"

"You mean who," Thomas answered.

Felicity looked at him in surprise. Dawn edged over the horizon and turned the light outside the windows a dark and angry pink. "Have you lost someone?"

"No," he said then stopped and stared at her with quiet intent. "There was a hint, a clue, from a crew we captured. I should have known what they intended to do, how they meant to lure us away and leave Basseterre and our waters with little security. I – I failed. I'm sorry."

"You have failed no one," Felicity insisted. She suddenly understood him. "Thomas, you did not fail the island, and you did not fail me. Most importantly, surely you know you did not fail your mama."

His jaw tightened. Felicity touched his cheek. When she met his eyes unflinchingly, she put her hands on his shoulders, and ignored

the surprised look on his face when she pushed him down into it to rest. "You could stop every pirate in the world, and it would never change what your father did. It's done. He's gone. Let it all go once and for all."

What she really wanted to do was touch her lips to his and see if he would kiss her again as he had in the churchyard, but she could see his fatigue. She wondered what he'd think when she told him that she'd decided to stay. She'd made up her mind at last while she wrote Femy the letter, and this time she wouldn't be swayed. Yes, Mr. Marsh hoped to shame her away. Yes, Fitz had suggested it if she was so unhappy, but Felicity knew she would never be happy again if she went away.

She loved the Indies too much, her friends, and her brother. Maybe someday Thomas Doyle would change his mind. If not, perhaps she could convince her heart to get over him. There would always be another ball or new stranger in town. Hopefully, one who would not mind she was one of *those* Barrows if she could ever bear to be courted again.

Relenting, Thomas settled himself in the chair, and it was then she saw a bruise swelling on his cheek. She made a noise of concern, hurried out for a wet cloth, and returned to dab it on his face. The morning light softened, and it glowed around him. "Here," she stammered, and he looked up, staring like he'd never seen her before.

Felicity stopped lamely, the cloth hanging in the air.

"Flick," he whispered in a low throaty tone, and in one motion stood and swept an arm around her waist. Felicity found herself tight in his embrace, her chin on his shoulder, his heart beating into her own. Heat surged over her in a giant wave when he nestled his lips against her neck and warmed it with his breath. "You could have been hurt—or worse."

He did care! Perhaps someday he could love her despite his fears. "I had a good instructor," she managed to reply without her voice trembling, but she could not hide the ripples of passion she felt standing close against him. Her heart blew like the wind. "I - I hope I may continue my lessons even though my reputation is ruined."

"Ruined?" Thomas pulled his head back, and his dark eyes blackened with anger. "Is Marsh still talking? Chadwick Marsh is a slimy, no good eel," he growled, "an *anguille* if I ever saw one."

Felicity blinked back tears. "I believe he only wanted to marry me to increase his holdings on the island, to start a distillery for more income to send back to England to appease his family."

"Without regard to the cost."

Felicity nodded at him, solemn. "I know, but that is how planters think."

"I meant you," whispered Thomas, "your heart."

His words melted her. He cared more about her than he did reputations and rumors. "It's no wonder you wanted to burn down that great house on the hill. I'm sorry I..." She hesitated, feeling her cheeks burn, and looked away less he discover her true feelings. "I'm sorry you cannot have what you want—if it would have made you feel better. Healed you."

"That's not what I want anymore." Thomas brushed his finger under her chin and raised it. "I'll never feel better if I burn down Sugar Hill."

Felicity ached for him. "I know you'll never forget it, but I don't want you to be alone either." Her pulse quickened at her words, and she knew he could feel it. "I just want you to be at peace," she relented with a whisper, knowing that it couldn't include her.

The warmth between them swelled as if they held the sun. Eyes blazing with something she could not name, Thomas whispered, "I think you're right, Flick. I don't think there's anything I can do to forget it, but I can put it behind me and stop looking back. It hurts, but I don't have to dwell on it. Best of all, I've learned I don't want to." He pressed his lips together, and his gaze left her eyes and traveled down to her mouth. The sound of her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

"The thing is... Felicity," he continued, "I am a much happier man when I'm looking ahead—when I am looking at who is beside me. Like you." He moved his face closer, and the heat between them burst into flames. Felicity dug her fingers into his thick shoulders, solid and sure.

"Me?"

Thomas nodded. "You have taken my heart as certain as I took those corsairs, Flick, and I - I would sail all the way to England with you if you would consider me for your match." He finished as if the air had been sucked out of him then clamped his mouth shut.

Felicity realized the echoes of her heart were not echoes at all, but Thomas's heart pulsating as fast as her own. "Come to England?"

she cried, choking on her hopes. "You would want a match with me?"

"You and only you," he promised. "Sometimes I cannot bear the past following me from behind like a shadow, but when I am with you I don't notice it at all. I..." His voice strangled as if he might cough. "I believe in what we could be." Thomas's eyes misted over like midnight fog. "I could believe in a promise, a vow, between you and me."

Felicity's eyes flooded over, and she pressed deeper into him, brushing her cheek against the hard and scratchy stubble that had grown along his jaw during the long night.

"If you would be mine," he whispered breathlessly.

"You do not mind that my sister..."

"Married for love?"

A joyous laugh erupted, and she wiped away a tear. "Yes. Femy. You do not mind?"

"No, and I do not mind your brother's spending habits, for that is his business as long as it does not interfere with mine. In fact, I hope to thank him someday."

Felicity giggled. "You mean for sending me here."

"I do."

She laughed, feeling a blush creep up her neck at words reminiscent of a sacred promise she'd dreamed of hearing at an altar someday. "I do, too," she blushed.

"You will?"

"I will," she repeated, lifting her chin to gaze into the eyes that had captivated her since she'd looked into them aboard a corsair's ship.

A slow smile spread across Captain Doyle's face, and the sultry implications hidden beneath it made her hot all over again. The heat of it made her think of a blazing fire just as Femy had hinted.

"Oh, Thomas!" Felicity murmured with a smile. "Then you shall have Sugar Hill, for Fitz has promised it to any poor soul that agrees to marry me." She softened. "You shall have it to burn if you wish." She could not bear to tell him how sad that would make her.

Thomas studied her, his mouth just inches away, teasing her with the possibility of another kiss. "I will not burn it at all," he told her, "but rebuild it and lease the land out to tenants and freemen."

"That's a wonderful idea," Felicity whispered, picturing herself on the long veranda. "It would be a shame to have such a lovely

view and not be able to enjoy it." She stared into his eyes. "I don't think I shall ever be truly happy if Sugar Hill is rebuilt and I must dream about it from the crowded streets of London."

A light pierced the passion in Thomas's dark gaze. "We could stay," he offered, and she heard the hope he was trying to hold back, felt the air hovering in his chest.

"Of course we must stay," she chirped, feeling her cheeks stretch into a happy, blustery smile. "I want to stay! I want to stay on St. Christopher, and I want to stay with you!"

Thomas laughed and lifted her up until her feet dangled in the air. "Oh, Flick!" he cried hoarsely, "how happy we will be!"

"Yes," she agreed, sighing with delirious joy. She searched his eyes, her wishes and heart bared. Thomas lowered her back to the floor, just enough to touch her nose to his, and her eyes fluttered shut. She felt his mouth brush against hers. "Thomas," she whispered, but he kissed away her reservation until the world was spinning. Her feet touched the floor as he bent her back over his arm, and he kissed her just like Femy said a gentleman should do.

Felicity's head swam most properly, her body floated into the heavens, and she knew nothing at that moment but a happy introduction into a privateer's love that promised her forever.



Epilogue



With one arm draped around a newly-erected pillar on the veranda, Felicity Doyle pushed the bergère back on her head and squinted into rays of stark afternoon sun. The distinctive silhouette of her husband took shape as he appeared through the trees now thinned on either side of the old footpath that led up to the house. The crumbling edifices below the house that had once turned sugar cane into crystals, rum, and molasses, had been dismantled, their bricks and stones stacked into squares until they would be used for building new foundations. The land that had once grown sugar cane would now grow families.

Suppressing a small noise of pleasure, Felicity hurried down the freshly painted steps to meet him. "Is it true?" she called. "Is there news?"

"There is always news at the port," he cajoled her as she drew near. Thomas Doyle extended a hand as if unsure whether to pat or embrace her, and laughing at his shy hesitation, Felicity flew into him, flinging her arms around his neck. "Mrs. Coker called to see the new drawing room today, and she said the packet ship was in."

Thomas rocked Felicity back and forth in his arms. He smelled like the sun and a bit like ink. She twisted her head up to look into his dark eyes. "You have been at the treasury house," she guessed.

"There is no hiding anything from you, is there?" His lip curled at the corner.

"No," she replied stubbornly. He stared for a pause then dropped an abrupt kiss on her mouth that made her heart pirouette.

"The packet ship is in," he admitted, "and the money from your brother as well."

"Wonderful," said Felicity with satisfaction. "I told you Edward would be happy to invest in our little neighborhood even if it wasn't very much."

"Well," scoffed Thomas, swaying with her beneath a calabash tree, "it is not more than a little row of cottages to be sure, but between our nest egg and the Cokers' and Fitz's shares, altogether we will have enough to begin building the first three in a matter of weeks. It will be a right nice little lane I think."

"Sugar Hill," sighed Felicity with a happy smile. "It will be more than just a house now, although it is a lovely place." She looked back toward the knoll where her home sat. It had been refitted handsomely with a new roof, fresh paint as white as snow, and bright blue trim around the windows. "I shall love having neighbors nearby. We will have our own lovely little village and no need to rush into Basseterre for every little thing or good company."

Thomas chuckled, pressing his cheek against her forehead. "In time, but we must be patient." He pulled back as if remembering something. "As for good company, Flick..." He hesitated, patted around on his unfastened coat, and pulled out a folded letter. "There is other news as well, and something we should discuss."

Felicity pursed her lips. "My time is up," she pouted. "Sometimes I forget I have you only every other month and then you're off again with your *Defiants*."

He gave her a squeeze with the arm still around her waist. "It is just until construction on the cottages begin. Mr. Edens is pulling at the bit to take over the ship."

"He'll be a right fine captain to commandeer the *Defiant*," Felicity declared. "Why he escorted Mr. Marsh to Antigua on his way out, and you said it went as smooth as butter."

"Yes, and I was happy to let him," replied Thomas wryly. "Mr. Marsh would do better to stay in Yorkshire from here on out rather than dillydally in the Indies—if he knows what's good for him."

Felicity bit back a grin. "I'm sure his mama would agree and is happy to have him home." She knew Thomas still harbored feelings of envy and distaste for her former admirer. The parish priest had found Mr. Marsh hiding under the altar the morning after Basseterre's villainous pirate raid and lectured him sternly about faith and courage from the pulpit a Sabbath sermon later.

She straightened her hat and took Thomas by the hand, trying very hard not to stare at the letter in his grip. "Was there anything for me?" she hinted.

"Nothing from your sister," apologized Thomas as they ambled into the yard. "Perhaps it is delayed, although I'm sure your nephew

is as healthy and robust as ever. You Barrows are a hardy lot."

"You're right. I'm sure Femy and little George are as well as can be."

"Well, that George at least."

Felicity looked up with curiosity. Thomas cleared his throat. "What do you mean *that George*?" She slowed her pace.

He held up the letter. "I'm afraid there is news about the other George. Your brother, not Femy's baby."

"George?" Felicity crumpled her forehead. "Why? What has happened?"

"It's not what happened, but what he has done."

Felicity felt the familiar weight of dread press on her spine. "Oh, dear. The twins are often in a bind." She gulped and closed her eyes. "Was it a duel? He's such a flirt, Thomas. Who has he ruined?"

Thomas made a noise of amusement. "No one. He has bought a commission, you see, but not to India."

"No?"

"No, to British America, outside of Quebec," explained Thomas, "and he has made Gerald promise that he will not come. They are to be separated."

"Separated?" Felicity cried. "George and Gerald? I thought they would serve together somehow."

"Apparently the French and wilderness are too dangerous. Your mama has taken to bed in despair, certain he will be murdered by savages, and Edward has written to ask if we might help with a commission of another kind."

"For George? To send him somewhere else?"

"No, for Gerald," Thomas explained. "He would like Fitz and I to do everything in our power to see that he is sent here."

"To St. Christopher?"

"To the West Indies, at least."

"But Gerald has never even been on a ship," said Felicity in surprise.

"It's not too late to learn, I suppose, and there is the marines."

"Oh," faltered Felicity, "there is that. So there is to be no barristers in the family."

"I think Edward could surely use one," murmured Thomas. He led Felicity up the porch stairs, and they sat together on a wooden settle painted to match the window trim. A vase of gardenias Mrs. Stephens had set beside it wafted their scent through the air and

soothed Felicity's disbelief.

"So George is off to the Americas and Gerald to the equator."

"In one way or another," murmured her husband.

She sighed. "Well of course, I would welcome him here. I admit I do not mind the thought of another brother nearby. How I adore Gerald although I fear he may be lost without George at his side. He is prone more to books and his twin rather than travel and company."

"We must do what we can to make him comfortable and feel welcome."

"Even with orders? I love you for that," Felicity blurted. She looked into the eyes of the man next to her and felt her own brim over. "You have made room in your heart for me, and for Fitz, too, and now here comes another Barrow, and we have not been wed quite a year. You are inundated."

"I confess I do not mind a Barrow. You all may make a family man of me yet."

Felicity looked to see if he was teasing, but Thomas gazed at her with a soft look in his eyes that pierced her heart and made her flood with heat. She closed her eyes and leaned in to kiss him hungrily, thinking only that he would be gone again and for some time. How she missed him when he was away. "I do hope to make you a family man myself," she hinted. She heard him draw in a small breath of surprise at her very Femy-like comment and smiled at him from under her lashes.

The smacking sound of footsteps on the veranda startled her, and she pulled away. Thomas exhaled in frustration, and their eyes met in a heated look interrupted by Fitz trotting across the long porch. Felicity sat back with a sniff and snuck a peek at Thomas to see if he knew that she hoped he would later finish what they had just began.

Fitz came to an abrupt halt in front of the settle and put his hands on his hips. His hair was mussed as if he'd just raked it through with a fork. His cheeks looked pale, and his loose cravat nearly undone.

"Why Fitz," wondered Felicity, "whatever is the matter?" She watched his throat ripple with a nervous swallow and jumped to her feet. "I know," she said, reaching out for his arm. "Thomas has told me. George has a commission, and Gerald must come to the Indies to be near us."

Fitz's head wobbled between a nod and a toss. "Yes," he said, "Gerald. He will come, too." He let out a heavy breath and swiped his palm across his damp forehead.

Felicity tilted her chin. "Too?"

Fitz cupped his mouth. He stared blankly. Thomas rose to his feet. "What is it?" His rich tone sounded tender with concern.

"Miss Tillypenny," whispered Fitz from between his fingers.

Felicity felt her mouth slacken. "Did you say Tillypenny?"

He stared at her meaningfully, his eyes wide with terror and bobbed his chin.

"What? How?" Felicity pulled Fitz's hand away from his mouth. "Explain."

He gulped, his shocked gaze never leaving hers. "The Sanford's guest from Mayfair has arrived," he stammered.

Thomas gave a stiff nod. "A cousin. The new companion. She came in with the packet ship."

"Amelia Tillypenny?" exclaimed Felicity.

Fitz looked like he was going to be sick. "She is a second cousin to the family, according to Mrs. Sanford. Her daughter's companion and friend is *the* Miss Tillypenny."

"Well, I'll be a..." breathed Felicity in surprise. "I knew Miss Sanford would have a companion, but I did not expect it to be someone we knew." An incredulous smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Fitz jabbed a finger at her. "Don't." He shook his head. "Don't do that."

A laugh bubbled up in Felicity's chest. Thomas looked confused. "Who on earth is Miss Tillypenny," he demanded.

Felicity giggled. "You have nothing on pirates, Captain Doyle," she teased, "for Miss Amelia Tillypenny of Berkeley Square has hair as red as flames and—"

"Blows smoke twice as hot," finished Fitz with a frown, "like a dragon."

Felicity grabbed her sides and bent over with laughter.

"It's not funny, Flick," Fitz stormed.

"Oh, but it is!"

Thomas made a noise of discontent. Felicity reached for his arm. "Oh, Thomas, do not mind us. It is only Miss Tillypenny is the one girl Fitz could never charm or impress, and when her family suggested a union after she came out, she flat out refused him

before he could even ask."

"And I wouldn't have either," seethed Fitz. "I was going to sea, thank the Gods." His cheeks took on color and blazed with indignation.

Thomas narrowed his eyes. "Are you frightened of this woman, Fitzwilliam? You look like you're going to explode."

Fitz stiffened. "No, I'm not frightened of her. A woman? *Bah*! She is too serious, too learned, too sharp-tongued, and too, too-"

"Beautiful?" teased Felicity. She giggled again. "Miss Tillypenny was the only female on earth that could make Fitz dodge and run for cover."

"If you could call a scarlet-headed shrew such a thing. I'm sure she has fangs behind those ruby red lips."

Thomas's rare smile crept across his face, and he darted a look at Felicity she knew too well. "Oh," he said in a lazy voice, "I would never call a shrew anything but a problem," he assured her brother.

Felicity grinned, and Thomas gave her a sly wink. "Regardless of it though, we have agreed to dine with the Sanfords on Friday, and I have asked that you might come," he informed Fitz.

"What?" cried Fitz in a panic.

Felicity bit her tongue to keep from laughing.

"I explained that you would be ashore, and I might need to excuse myself for business, so Mrs. Sanford insisted I invite you."

Fitz gave his head a small shake. "Then you have not seen me," he said in a low voice. He looked around as if seeing where he was for the first time. "I only came to tell, to tell you about Gerald, but I see you know," he managed. "I should—"

"You should come in and lie down," suggested Felicity, "for we have seen you, and you look terrible."

Fitz wiped his forehead again and straightened. "No, thank you, Flick, dear, I should go. To the club." He swallowed. "I'm going," he repeated, and offered them a thin smile that did not suit him. "Yes," he insisted, bowing quickly and giving a dismissive wave. "I only just saw the woman, Miss Tillypenny I mean, on my way to tell you, to tell you about Gerald, you see."

Felicity stared. "Why Fitz, I don't think I've heard you ramble on like that since you were fifteen."

He grunted at her with a small glare then gave Thomas a wincing smile. "I shall see you in the morning, I suspect."

"Yes, at the docks."

"Fair enough, but you must not tell anyone you have seen me, especially Mrs. Sanford. I will not be able to dine on Friday."

Felicity's rather shaken brother scuttled across the porch like a crab with a seagull after it. She looked at Thomas in wonder. "I do declare he is all undone."

A wily smile spread across Thomas's face. "It shall be a very good dinner at the Sanfords this Friday," he decided. "A very good time indeed."

Felicity elbowed him. "Now, Thomas, he said he did not want to come. I can see you are up to no good, although I can't say I blame you. We must remember Fitz did let you marry his shocking spinster of a sister who refuses gentlemen, wields swords, and chases pirates," she reminded him.

Thomas took her by the elbow and pulled her back into his arms, lowering them both to the settle. The sun had dropped its gaze from the hills leaving the air shimmering with gold. "He teased me mercilessly," Thomas admitted, "when I told him I was in love."

"But he was delighted it was me."

"He was," Thomas admitted, "and I am delighted to return the favor. I cannot wait to meet this Miss Tillypenny."

"Oh, she's a sensible, serious girl, but she isn't one to be flirted or teased," Felicity warned. "A rare beauty with fiery red tresses and not a sunspot to be seen. It's unfortunate she frightens most people away with her frank opinions and intelligence, but she *is* stunning if I say so myself."

Felicity realized Thomas was admiring her and felt any envy for Miss Tillypenny's looks melt away.

"Beauty is not that rare a thing," Thomas whispered, "at least not on Sugar Hill."

Felicity bit her lip and smiled, and he fell quiet, taking her by the chin with a strong hand and kissing her until the sun sank below the horizon and the shadows of Sugar Hill followed them into the house.

The End



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About the Author



Danielle Thorne writes historical and contemporary romance novels from south of Atlanta, Georgia. Married to the same fellow for thirty years, she's the mother of four boys, two daughters-in-law, and she has two grandbabies. There are also cats involved.

Danielle is a graduate of Ricks College and BYU-Idaho. Besides writing pursuits, she's active in her church and community. Free time is filled with books, movies, too much yardwork, running or hiking, and cruising the beautiful, blue seas. She's also moonlighted as an editor and is the author of non-fiction for young adults. Her first book with Harlequin's Love Inspired line was released July 2020.



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